

# SADIE BOSQUE

*Book 1 in  
The Shadows  
series*

## A RETURN OF THE WICKED EARL



**Sadie Bosque**

*A return of the Wicked Earl*

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*To every person who had ever fallen down hard. So hard, in fact, they  
thought they wouldn't be able to get up... But did.*

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## *Author's note*

*This work of fiction contains adult content, strong language, violence, death, bullying, nightmares, miscarriage and other content that might be triggering to some.*



# Prologue

*Winter 1731*

Annalise sat on the sill of a lone garret window, looking at the bright, full moon.

This spacious, albeit poorly illuminated, room was her former nursery. A year ago, when she turned nine, her parents had given her a big chamber downstairs and locked this one away with all her childhood memories. She was now preparing for court and learning to act like a proper lady.

Annalise was not ready to lock her childhood away. Yes, she wanted to go to balls. She wanted to find a perfect gentleman who would sweep her off her feet and make her head spin. But she also wanted to read her fables and have pretend tea parties. She still had years until her come-out ball. Surely, she'd be able to learn everything faster than that?

So, she sneaked into a housekeeper's chambers and stole the key to her "magical kingdom."

It had always been dark and dank there. Now all the furniture was covered with white sheets. Annalise had quite a few pleasant memories of the place, however. It still held all of Annalise's old toys, her favorite Italian fables, and her journal, where she wrote down her daily experiences. It was a place where no one disturbed her—not that anyone paid any particular attention to her anyhow. But this was a magical place, full of promises and possibilities. This was a place to dream.

The door screeched open and Lavinia, Annalise's friend, sauntered into the room. She locked the door behind her and dashed to sit next to Annalise.

It was past both of their bedtimes, but that was the only time the two girls could meet. As much as Annalise's parents ignored her, they filled up her day with piano lessons, etiquette instructions, French and other languages, and many other things.

Annalise enjoyed the piano lessons the most. She'd also developed a fascination with Italian culture and language. No other activity kept her interest. During the other lessons, she would look longingly outside at the beautiful weather and sigh.

The weather wasn't always beautiful in Essex; sometimes it was rainy and dull. But even on those days, she would be happy to frolic in the rain instead of sitting in stuffy old rooms with stuffy old teachers.

It was even worse when the guests were in the house, which was almost always. So she was hidden and restricted only to her rooms and the library.

Usually, she sat in this garret by herself. But when there was a house party, she was lucky if Lavinia's father brought her along.

Lavinia's father mostly didn't pay any attention to his daughter either. He was busy getting drunk and spent most of his days passed out in one part of the house or another. But on the days he did remember Lavinia's existence, Annalise knew she wouldn't see her friend for days. And then, days later, Lavinia would appear by her side again, with fresh cuts and bruises. But her spirit never wavered.

"There's a beautiful full moon out tonight," Lavinia whispered as she sat closer to Annalise. "We can have our tea party outside."

Annalise stifled a chuckle. "Our groundskeeper would chase us away. Or even worse, alert our parents."

Lavinia shrugged. "It's rare that the moon is so full in a cloudless sky."

Annalise tapped her lower lip with her finger. "I know what we can do. I read it in a book once. An old book of spells and enchantments."

Lavinia's mouth dropped open. "Where did you even find it?"

"In our library. It was hidden behind other books on the top shelf."

"Which you found by—"

"Perusing the shelves for something on the etiquette of doing boring things with boring people."

Both girls chuckled.

"Anyway, this book says that if you write down your wish on a piece of paper and then burn it by the candlelight on a full moon, your wish will come true."

"Truly?"

"That's what it said. Do you want to try it?"

Lavinia's eyes lit up with mischief. "I'll look for a piece of paper."

"I'll find us a quill and an ink!"

The girls scattered about the dusty garret, searching for their treasures. Once they found them, they sat back, their legs dangling from a windowsill.

"What are you going to wish for?" Lavinia asked.

Annalise frowned in thought. Then her features cleared, and she shifted closer to her friend. "I am going to wish for a grand love. A handsome prince to fall in love with, who will

take me to his faraway castle. He will, of course, fall in love with me at first sight. He will be kind and caring and buy me everything I ever wished for. He will shower me with attention and not look at anyone else but me.”

Lavinia let out a chuckle. “His neck will be craned to one side then.”

“I shall be considerate enough to move around,” Annalise said with a smirk, and both girls laughed. She dipped her quill into the inkwell and started scribbling as she spoke. “I wish for a love so grand that my beloved will carry me around in his arms so as not to dirty my golden slippers.”

Both girls laughed. Annalise blew on the ink to let it dry. “Your turn. What do you wish for?”

Lavinia craned her neck and stared at the ceiling as she thought. She then turned to the window and looked at the moon. “I don’t need a prince. A duke will do.”

Annalise chuckled and nudged Lavinia with her shoulder. “Oh, you mean Dane, of course.”

Dane, the Duke of Kensington, was a young man from a neighboring estate. Orphaned too young, he took on the responsibility of the dukedom when he was thirteen. Now, at seventeen, he was running the estate almost without the help of his guardians. He often visited both Lavinia and Annalise’s households to talk to their fathers.

Lavinia became infatuated with him the first time she saw him.

It might have had something to do with the way they’d met. Lavinia didn’t divulge all the details. She’d just said that her father was in one of his moods when Dane came one day. He intervened and stood up to him at that moment, sparing Lavinia a worse fate.

Ever since. He’d made sure to visit her household more often, and he always asked after her well-being.

Lavinia smiled. “Yes. He is the perfect gentleman for me. He is strong, quiet, and kind. He will save and shelter me from my father and his bad moods.” She dipped her quill in the inkwell. “I wish for a love that will take me away from all the pain.”

Annalise brought her piece of paper to the candle and pictured a beautiful, tall, strong young man as her note burned. Lavinia bit on her lip as she repeated the action until only a charred corner was left of her piece of paper. She shook her hand as the fire caught up to her fingers and dropped the charred piece, the embers flowing as the paper hit the floor.

# Chapter 1



*Winter 1741*

Blake heard a clink of metal as he tried to move his hands. Right, he was shackled. He'd almost forgotten. His head lolled forward as if it was too heavy for his neck to hold upright. He opened his eyelids and saw his bare chest was covered in dirt and blood. Slash marks and burns dotted his flesh, and his breeches were likewise torn and frayed. At least they were still keeping him modest.

"Passed out again, mate?" A hoarse, accented voice made Blake's head snap up.

A huge, broad-shouldered man, over six feet tall, stood before him. His long hair was dirty and covered with blood, his clothing filthy and in disarray. He held a small hammer and a rusty nail in his hands.

"I need you awake," the man growled between his brown, crooked teeth. "So you can tell me what you know about them shadows. Otherwise..." He looked appreciatively at his nail and shrugged his enormous shoulders. The action brought the nail and hammer into the thin line of light cracking through the veiled window, making the instruments glint ominously.

Blake felt sweat running down his forehead and the back of his neck. The sight of that rusty nail alone would make Blake blab all the secrets in the world, even if he hadn't already endured hours of torture.

The trouble was, Blake had no idea what the foul-smelling ruffian wanted from him. He was prattling on about some covert group of criminals called The Shadows. Blathering on about how nobody knew who their leader was and where they were based. And somehow, he thought that Blake had answers to these questions.

Well, Blake didn't.

He'd tried pleading ignorance. He'd tried professing innocence, denying any knowledge of The Shadows and anything related to them, but it hadn't done any good. In fact, it only made things worse, since his captors enjoyed making him cry and beg. The nail and hammer were only the latest additions to other cruel implements the thugs had used on Blake's body.

He'd already been starved and showered with ice-cold water. There were three or four bandits, and they came in one after another, each with his own ideas of torture.

Blake had quickly learned that keeping silent was the only way to lessen the abuse inflicted by his tormentors. That knowledge, however, didn't prevent his limbs from trembling and his throat from making small, pathetic mewling sounds in terror. He shut his eyes tightly, so he wouldn't see his knees shaking in trepidation.

"You're not speaking again," the thug continued his monologue. "Which means only one thing."

He advanced on Blake, kneeled in front of him, and Blake felt the nail being placed right below his kneecap. Blake tried to pull his leg away with a whimper, but he was shackled to the floor by the ankle, and the movement only caused him pain. He gritted his teeth and started breathing frantically in panic.

"The Shadows, mate."

Blake opened his eyes and saw the thug looking up at him. Then he suggestively placed the hammer to the bud of the nail and raised his eyebrows.

"No?" The thug lifted the hammer, preparing for the swing, not taking his eyes off Blake.

"No!"

Blake awakened from sleep with a start. Cold sweat ran from his forehead and temples and down his face. He was breathing heavily as if he'd run for miles. His hand immediately moved and caressed his numb knee. He looked around the dark room. The sounds of the waves crashing against the outer walls soothed his raw nerves. He was lying on the floor, his limbs swaying intact with the ship.

It was just a dream. He was safe.

Blake ran his hand over his sweaty forehead, then scrubbed his palm down his face. As he moved his hand even lower, he encountered the old chain around his neck. He tugged on it until he reached a small locket pendant. He opened the locket and peered inside.

Blake couldn't see well in almost complete darkness, but he didn't have to. He knew what he'd find there. A portrait of a beautiful young lady, his wife.

If it were light enough, he'd see her innocent face staring directly at him. He'd see her golden locks collected at the top of her head in a neat chignon, her lush mouth in a sensual pout.

Blake closed the locket and held it protectively in his tight fist, clutching it to his chest. He'd be back soon. He'd be reunited with his beautiful Annalise, and everything would be all

right once again.

\* \* \*

Annalise sat on the bed in her white chemise, staring into the fire. The flames danced in the hearth, licking at the walls, crackling softly, and bathing the room with a faint glow. A light smile played about her lips. It was the day of her betrothal ball. The second one in her lifetime and, she hoped, the last. The thought of going through it all again—the wedding, the wedding night—made her shiver.

“Are you cold, my lady?” her lady’s maid, Ruth, called out and moved to stand beside her. “Here, we better clothe you quick.” The maid handed Annalise her stockings, and she diligently put them on. The white silk was cool against her warm skin, but the sensation was not unpleasant. She took the garter from her maid’s hands, wrapped it above her knee, and tied it in a knot.

Ruth had dressed Annalise for her first betrothal ball too. She was also the one who’d readied her for her wedding day and wedding night.

Goosebumps crept up her hands as Annalise remembered her first betrothal ball and how excited she was that day. Hopping as if on clouds, happy, starry-eyed, young, and oh, so naïve. She shook her head at the memories.

This time would be different. At the very least, she knew what waited for her on her wedding night. And this time she knew the man she was marrying.

Kensington was a nice, reliable gentleman. She had known him her entire life, and he’d always been there for her. He was her friend. After the previous disaster of a marriage, this was exactly what she needed.

Ruth brought the stays. Annalise stood and placed her hands on the back of the chair as Ruth helped her into them and started vigorously tightening up the knots at the back. The new gown Annalise had ordered for the ball had a tiny waist, and she needed the stays to be tightened stiffly for her to get into it successfully.

As Ruth worked her stays, Annalise pondered that she should feel suffocated and out of breath, but the more layers of clothing she put on, the lighter she felt. As if each piece signified the next step in her life, carrying her away from the sordid memories of the past.

Ruth brought the petticoat, and Annalise stepped into it, staring blankly into the hearth.

She'd loved Blake, she still did, and perhaps she always would. But the marriage to him hadn't turned out the way she'd hoped, and this time, she had a chance at a quiet, comfortable life with her good friend.

Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, thinking of Blake's fate, but she blinked them away. Blake was her past now. She needed to concentrate on the future.

She wanted children. After the fiasco of her last marriage, this was the only reason she'd agreed to marry at all. If she'd had Blake's child, the state of her finances would probably have forced her to remarry anyway. But at least then, she needn't lie with her husband. The thought of sharing a bed with Kensington made her stomach tie in knots.

Ruth brought her the bodice, and after Annalise donned it, Ruth helped her into a beautiful coral gown with golden embroidered ornamentation. The sleeves hugged her arms up to her elbows and then flared and ruffled at the ends.

She closed her eyes. The icy blue gown she wore for her first betrothal ball flashed before her eyes. She remembered how her eyes shone with happiness in the looking glass. Annalise had to shake her head again. There was no need for these memories to invade her tonight. She opened her eyes and forced herself to smile at her reflection.

"Will that be all, my lady?" Ruth asked from behind her.

"Yes, Ruth, thank you." Annalise swallowed, still regarding herself in the looking glass. Her maid curtsied and hurried out of the room.

Annalise slowly ventured toward her vanity table. She picked up her white gloves and slowly drew them on. Her fingers trembled as she fastened her gloves over her arms. Soon, she would officially become the Duchess of Kensington.

\* \* \*

Blake stepped off the ship and onto firm land for the first time in what seemed like forever. His heart rate sped up, and his breathing roughened as the heady feeling of joy assailed him. He looked around the moving crowds of people. The shouts from the surrounding passersby, the sounds of his native accent, even if spoken by common street boys and dirty workers, warmed his heart. He nearly dropped to his knees and kissed the ground at that moment. Tears burned at the backs of his eyelids and threatened to overflow through the corners of his eyes. Blake swallowed and took a steadying breath, managing his emotions.

He was home. He was finally back home.

Blake rushed through the crowd, looking for the hackney coaches, unable to hold his smile. He patted his pocket to make sure he hadn't lost his purse with coins in his excitement and hurried his steps.

He forgot all about his numb knee, muscle aches, and bruises. All the worries had vanished. He shouldered his way out of the docks, not looking back, not even sparing a glance at the ship, at the life he'd never asked for and was finally leaving behind.

Several moments later, he successfully hailed a hackney and sprung inside.

"Payne Townhouse," he shouted to the coachman and thumped the roof of the carriage.

The vehicle lurched into motion, and Blake rested his head against the seat cushions and closed his eyes. He couldn't help but grin, taking in the familiar sounds of a rattling carriage and horse hooves, the comforting smells of horses, and the carriage's leather seats. He reached his hand inside his coat and under his simple sailor's shirt and took out his locket.

His smile turned gentle as he rubbed the miniature inside the locket with his thumb. The somber blue eyes of his lovely wife stared at him from the portrait.

How was his little wife, he wondered for the millionth time as he looked at her dear face. What had become of her? Did she mourn him still? Was she even still in his townhouse or at one of his estates?

In Blake's absence, his cousin, Mr. Marcus Townsend, would have taken hold of the title and his estates. They weren't close, but Blake was sure Townsend would never eject his wife. However, he worried whether she was adequately provided for or not. He hadn't exactly left his affairs in order when he disappeared. None of it mattered anymore, however. He was back, and he would find Annalise wherever she was.

He would find her, hug her close to his heart, and never let her go.

By the time he rolled along the street of his townhouse, the sun was already setting. Blake could still see the outlines of the houses clearly through the carriage window. He held the curtain in one hand while he openly gawked at the familiar street, swallowing back the overwhelming emotions. He knew this place like the back of his hand, perhaps better. Several more houses and—

The carriage slowed down to a near halt. Blake scowled at the wall separating him from the coachman, wondering what could stall their progress. It didn't matter—he might as well walk the rest of the way. He thumped the roof of the carriage and opened the door.

"Oy!" he yelled to the coachman. "I shall disembark here."



He jumped out of the carriage without waiting for the step to be lowered and threw several coins to the coachman. He tipped his hat and glanced ahead. Now that he was out on the street, he saw why the carriage was moving at a snail's pace. There was a traffic jam.

Several more carriages waited up ahead while passengers descended from their vehicles and entered the house down the street.

There was a ball, judging by the crowd. Blake smirked. He wasn't looking forward to socializing or encountering crowds of people. Truth be told, he didn't want to see anyone except for his lovely wife. However, he couldn't help but rejoice at the familiar view of aristocrats attending a social event.

He moved slowly toward his townhouse, looking around at the richly dressed lords and ladies as they passed him in their expensive carriages. He probably looked like a beggar, he thought wryly as he caught some disgruntled looks. In his sailor's outfit, he did not look like an earl at all. At the moment, however, he didn't care. Let them gawk all they wanted. Nothing could dim the happiness of finally being back home. Blake smiled as he moved along the street.

Several moments later, however, his amusement faded as he realized where all the richly dressed lords and ladies were headed. They were mounting the steps to his townhouse.

It seemed like his cousin was having a party.

Blake winced at the thought.

He looked at the watch. He'd been away for fourteen months and seventeen days, after all. It was natural that the house wasn't in mourning anymore. He couldn't fault everyone else for continuing with their lives.

His knee started aching suddenly as the weariness of his long journey finally started setting in, but he shook himself. The journey wasn't over yet. He needed to hold on for a little while longer. Then he would see his wife. She was just beyond those doors. He was sure.

He gathered his strength and sprinted up the steps, only to be stopped by a young footman at the door.

"Invitation only, sir," the young man said.

"I don't require an invitation to my own damn house," Blake growled. He didn't recognize the servant, and the fact irritated him even more.

A familiar voice called from behind the footman, "Is there something amiss, Rogers?"

"I believe you are mistaken, sir. This is Lord Payne's townhouse," the young buck insisted, still addressing Blake.

Blake raised a brow in irritation, but before he could chastise the footman, his old butler appeared from behind the footman's shoulder. His eyes widened, and his mouth slacked in astonishment. The servant had never shown as much emotion in his entire life, and Blake found himself grinning at the old man.

"Crane," he said and walked closer to him. "Explain to the young pup who the master of the house is." He gestured to the footman who'd detained him at the door. Blake walked past the astonished butler and patted him on his back as he did so. "Glad to see you, Crane," he said and slunk inside.

The crush inside the townhouse was unbearable. The smell of sweaty bodies threw Blake's mind back to the time he'd spent on the ship, cleaning the docks, side by side with other sailors. But then other smells penetrated his senses: the female perfumes, the flowers, the burning of the candle wax. He heard the rustling of ladies' skirts, the light chatter, and feminine laughter.

Blake looked around, feasting his eyes on the beautiful scene before him. He hadn't seen anything as wonderful for over a year.

He stepped farther inside and encountered sideways glances directed his way. He looked down at his clothing and frowned. It wouldn't do to show up in the ballroom looking this way. He wore a shabby blue tunic, covered by a dark brown quilted coat and no waistcoat. His petticoat breeches were worn down and abraded at the knees, his shoes scratched up and muddy. No, he couldn't show up in the ballroom, in front of half of London, looking like he was some beggar from St. Giles. He was the master of the house, after all.

Blake turned toward the stairs. He was about to ascend the steps to his room in search of his old and comfortable clothing when the music stopped abruptly, and a male voice called for people's attention. Blake halted with one foot atop the first step of the stairwell. Something was going on in his house. He turned slightly and strained to hear what the gentleman was saying.

"It is with immense pleasure that I announce my betrothal to Lady Annalise, the Countess of Payne!"

The exclamations of delight and clapping followed, muffled by the roaring of rushing blood inside Blake's head. He couldn't have heard that right. Blake stumbled away from the stairs and sauntered toward the French doors. He didn't know how he made it into the ballroom. He didn't know how he shouldered his way past the crowd. The only thing that registered in his mind was what he saw the moment he finally made it into the circle of

people.

The Duke of Kensington was standing in the middle of the ballroom, kissing Annalise's hand. *Kissing my wife!*

The ringing in Blake's ears intensified, and his heart rate accelerated even more. The duke finally turned toward the cheering crowd and raised their linked hands.

Blake's legs moved on their own accord as he stepped farther inside the circle. He heard hushed whispers and gasps around him, but he only had his eyes for his wife. She stood demurely by the duke's side, her eyes downcast, her hand still in the duke's grasp. She finally raised her head, and her gaze met his.

"Annalise," he breathed.

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted in an inaudible gasp.

The blood violently rushing through his head muted all the sounds of the ballroom, and his vision blurred in front of him. The next thing Blake knew, his knees hit the hardwood floor as he fell. He threw his arms out in an attempt to catch himself but refused to take his eyes off his wife. The last thing he saw was Annalise's worried face as she fell to her knees in front of him. And then everything went black.

## Chapter 2



Annalise was paralyzed with shock. Blake, Lord Payne, *her husband*, was standing right in front of her, in the middle of the ballroom, on the night of her betrothal to another man. Then his eyes glazed over, and he fell to his knees. The next moment, all her thoughts disappeared, and she ran toward him.

Blake was alive. He was here.

She fell to her knees and caught his heavy body against hers.

“Doctor! Bring me a doctor, now!” Annalise yelled as she tried unsuccessfully to keep her husband upright.

“Here, let me,” her betrothed said steadily from behind her. He knelt beside her, took Blake’s weight off her, and laid him gently on the floor.

In her haste and worry over Blake, she had completely forgotten about Kensington.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she whispered.

Kensington’s warm hand settled on hers and squeezed her gently. He felt Blake’s pulse and checked his body for any outward signs of injury. He frowned, and Annalise grew frantic with worry.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said in a calm voice. “By all appearances, he is all right. However, we shan’t know for sure until the doctor arrives.”

Annalise nodded and turned to study her husband’s face. He looked different. So much so that she would have passed him in a crowd. She wouldn’t have recognized him now either if he hadn’t called her name.

He’d said it in the same breathy way that used to cause goosebumps on her skin. His velvety smooth voice still made her foolish heart leap in delight.

However, his voice was perhaps the only thing recognizable about him. His face was lean and dark. Red spots adorned the crests of his cheeks and nose, as if he spent a lot of time outdoors, under the sun or against the wind. His nose was crooked, as if it’d been broken one

too many times. His dark brown hair, now long and tangled, lay strewn about his shoulders.

Annalise didn't remember Blake's hair from before. Come to think of it, she had never seen Blake without his wig. Not in the daylight, at least.

Her gaze traveled back to his face. It was hard, and a few lines had settled over his forehead and around his mouth. *What has he gone through? Where has he been for over a year to make him look so different?*

"He seems to just have fainted," Kensington stated beside her, successfully pulling her out of her thoughts. "Probably the excitement of coming home and—"

"And seeing his wife getting betrothed to another man?" Annalise looked up at the duke with tear-filled eyes. Her lower lip protruded and quivered as she tried to hold on to her tears.

"It is not your fault," he whispered. "We don't know what had befallen him before his return." He turned to the assembled crowd as he stood. "I need a couple of gentlemen who would be kind enough to help transport Lord Payne to his bed."

Two gentlemen stepped forward instantly. Annalise recognized Blake's long-time friend, Jarvis, Viscount St. John, and Blake's cousin, the current Lord Payne. Or should she say the former Lord Payne and the current heir presumptive, Mr. Marcus Townsend? This all was too confusing.

The gentlemen hoisted Blake up and carried him through the parting crowd and up to the second floor. Annalise followed in their wake.

They carried him into the master's bedchamber—Mr. Townsend insisted he should take his rightful bed.

"Countess." Kensington turned to Annalise and gave her a look that meant he was about to say something she wouldn't like, and he knew it. "I think you should leave. We shall need to undress him and see if there are any injuries I've missed and then wash him and prepare him for a doctor's visit."

Annalise frowned. "Why do I need to leave? I am his wife. Dane," she said in a softer tone. She'd never called Kensington by his Christian name, but it just slipped at that moment. "I am grateful for everything you've done for me, but I can't leave him. I am still his wife."

"I know. But we don't know what he went through in those months away. We don't know if..." He cleared his throat. "Until I am sure there is nothing about him that might cause you shock—"

"Who do you take me for?" Annalise gaped at the man she thought she knew better than

anyone else in this world. A man who'd protected her and comforted her during the worst months of her life and couldn't believe she was hearing him right. "I am no simpering debutante. If there is anything wrong with my husband, I can deal with it."

"Please." The Duke of Kensington very rarely pleaded with anyone.

Annalise pursed her lips and looked at the prone body of her husband sprawled on the bed. "All right. But if you find nothing... objectionable on his person, please call for me. I shall help you prepare him for the doctor's arrival." Annalise spared one last glance at her husband's body and left the room with her head held high.

The moment she exited the room, however, her shoulders slumped, and a horrid sob escaped her. She covered her mouth with her hand and leaned her back against the wall. The emotions, the excitement of the night, were finally catching up to her. Tears ran down her cheeks, and she angrily swiped them away.

There was no use. She was sobbing in earnest now, crying like an inconsolable babe. She tried to calm down, but the sobs wouldn't stop. Her legs gave out, and she slid down the wall. She placed her head against her knees and covered it with her arms.

The grief, the loss of what could have been, and the pain of loneliness were all seeping out of her in the form of tears. She was so wrapped up in her thoughts and feelings that she hadn't heard the approaching footsteps. She realized somebody was near only when she heard the rustle of skirts, then a gentle hand about her shoulders. Annalise turned her head and caught a whiff of orange blossoms. The comforting, familiar scent of her friend's perfume.

"Caroline," she managed through her sobs and placed her head on her friend's shoulder. The sound of the door shutting beside her made her jump in reaction.

"It's just the doctor, dear," Caroline said with a squeeze to her shoulder.

"I need to—" Annalise made to stand, but Caroline held her down.

"What you need is to compose yourself. To calm your rioting nerves, or you won't be of help to anyone."

"But—"

"No," Caroline said firmly. "Kensington and the other men have everything well in hand. Your husband is"—she paused as if searching for a word—"indisposed at the moment, and he won't know whether you're in the room or not. My chaperone is a few discrete feet away, making certain nobody else comes this way. Now, before he wakes up, we need you back to your usual self. Composed, collected, calm. We don't know what he's gone through, dear, and

he will need your strength to rely upon.”

“My strength?” Annalise let out a short snort. “At the moment, I don’t have enough strength to keep me upright.”

“Exactly.” Caroline nodded in affirmation. “So you cry, you wail and yell if you have to, but do it out here. I shall help you. Then, and only after you’ve raged your frustrations, can you go inside that room. Now,” she said in a gentler tone. “Tell me how you feel?”

“How do I feel?” Annalise watched her friend with a weary expression.

Millions of thoughts rushed through her head. For one, she thought Caroline was too composed and calm in this strange situation. She was an unmarried young lady; she was supposed to be distressed or possibly even faint. Annalise, on the other hand, should be the one to take charge, be strong and collected. She should be the one in the room with her husband. She also needed to talk to Kensington and come to some sort of accord with him.

Yes, thoughts Annalise had plenty of. But feelings? She seemed to have none.

“I don’t know how I feel,” she said honestly.

Caroline smiled sadly. “The man you loved dearly, the man who then disappeared and was presumed dead, just came back into your life. It’s understandable that you feel confused.” She paused. “Do you feel as though you’ve betrayed him, having gotten betrothed so fast?”

Annalise shifted to turn fully toward her friend. “No. I mean, yes. Maybe.” She grimaced. “I did at first, but that’s not what happened. And it was he who betrayed me. He—” She bit her lip and shook her head. “It’s unimportant now. I don’t know how I am to act around him now that he’s back. I loved him, yes. But it’s been so long ago, and so much has happened since then. Even before he disappeared. I felt glad—I am glad that he is alive. I care for him deeply —”

“Loved him? Care for him?” Caroline frowned at her. “Has your heart changed, then? Are you in love with Kensington now?”

Annalise shook her head. “No. He has been a good friend, and I told you before, it was just an understanding. A mutually beneficial alliance of two friends, nothing more. But it doesn’t change the fact that before Blake disappeared—”

The door opened then, and Lord St. John stuck out his head. “Lady Payne, would you like to come in? The doctor has finished his evaluation.”

Annalise nodded and scrambled to stand up. Caroline also rose and steadied Annalise as she swayed.

“Thank you, dear friend,” Annalise said with a smile.

Caroline squeezed her hands, and Annalise entered the room.

\* \* \*

Blake dreamed of her again.

Of course, he dreamed of her. There was nothing else for him to dream about. The rest of his life had been hollow, useless. What had he been doing all those years before he met her? Before he set his eyes on a charming debutante, standing by the wall of a crowded ballroom, fidgeting with her fan. Before he had followed her out onto the patio.

Thank God he had followed her. What if he'd listened to his stupid brain, which had whispered that she'd been too young, too innocent for him? He wasn't ready for marriage, and ruining a young lady was not an option.

If he'd listened to his stupid mind and not followed his soul, what would he have dreamed about all those nights during captivity? If he hadn't had her to look forward to, her to live for, would he even have fought to survive?

Cool fingers ran across his forehead again. A fleeting touch. But so tender, so soft, so full of hope. Hope that someday he'd return home, and her hands would be on him again. This time for real.

This dream was salvation. But it was also torture. Because once he woke up in the dank dungeon again, or in his cell on the slave-ship, or... where was he again?

His consciousness threatened to resurface, but he fought to stay in the state of slumber. It didn't matter where he was. Wherever that was, the reality was too cruel. At times, he wished to never wake up from his feverish dreams, experiencing her touch, surrounded by her scent.

Lavender. She had always smelled like lavender and a fresh meadow after the rain. The only thing missing in this hazy dream was the sound of her voice. Oh, how he'd missed her voice, her musical laugh, the way she hummed under her breath.

She couldn't stand the silence. And now he couldn't stand it either. Nor the dark. How he wished to open his eyes and see her again. But he knew it was impossible. So he stayed in the state of slumber, drinking in the feelings of what it would have been like to have her near.

*Annalise.* Her name was a benediction. A prayer.

His darling Annalise.

His mind clung to her name, not willing to let it go. It was fresh on his lips, too. Hadn't he



said it out loud recently?

Of course, he'd whispered her name into the void too many times to count. He fell asleep and woke up with her name on his lips, but this time, it felt different. It felt... real.

There was a sound in the room.

Never a good sign. It meant he wasn't alone. And in his reality, not alone meant with an enemy.

Blake opened his eyes and jumped into a sitting position.

It was soft beneath him. And a flickering light caught his eyes, so he turned toward it. A candle sat on a bedside table. Blake lowered his gaze to the mattress below. He was in a bed.

"Blake," said a soft voice from the darkness.

Her voice.

Annalise.

Was he still dreaming?

Blake turned his head slowly, surveying the room all the while. He was in his old townhouse in London. He had no trouble recognizing the room; it was still the same. Although it had definitely changed. He finally craned his neck and looked at his wife.

She was sitting in the chair by the side of the bed. She took a glass of water from the bedside table and extended it toward him.

"The doctor said you should drink a lot of fluids," she said. "Please, drink."

Blake stared at the open face of his lovely wife and couldn't move. He was too afraid to spook the vision away. If he moved, she might disappear. She brought the glass closer to him. Blake's breathing grew rapid. He tried to say something, but his throat was too dry and scratchy.

He took the proffered drink and gulped the entire glass dry without taking his eyes off his wife.

She was innocence incarnate. So beautiful, so peaceful that he wanted to weep. She wore her hair up, tucked in a neat chignon. Her face was white and bloodless, except for her lush pink lips. Lord, he wanted to taste those lips. He'd missed the taste of her, the soft pressure of those lips against his.

"One more?" she asked, and he extended the glass to her.

She took it from him, her fingers lightly brushing against his. Blake stifled the urge to grab her by her hand and tumble her into bed with him, hug her tight, and keep her in his embrace forever.

She touched him. Which meant she was real.

The memories started coming back to him slowly. He was home. He was truly home.

He raked her with his gaze while she poured him more water, not being able to tear his eyes away from her. Not willing to ever stop watching her graceful movements. She handed him another glass of water, and he gulped it down. He gave her the empty glass and looked around the room again.

“Can you—” he croaked out before clearing his throat. “Can you light more candles, please? It’s too dark here.”

After fourteen months of separation, torturous weeks in captivity spent dreaming of finally seeing his wife, these were not the first words he’d imagined saying to her.

“Of course.” Annalise stood to comply.

Blake settled back against the pillows. His head still thrummed, so he didn’t want to risk getting up.

Besides, the bed was soft. Too soft. He imagined he wouldn’t be able to sleep comfortably in it for some time. But he’d persevere. Blake smirked.

Annalise had lighted half a dozen candles by that time, poured more water into his glass from the pitcher, and settled back into the chair.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

Blake looked back at her. He could see her more clearly for the candlelight. Her face looked troubled, or perhaps she was just weary. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and the surrounding skin looked puffy. She’d cried upon his return then. Had she missed him as much as he’d missed her?

She was still beautiful. Too beautiful to be real. He couldn’t believe she was truly there beside him. Fourteen bloody months without her touch. He needed to touch her.

Blake extended his hand and took her fingers in his. Her hand was cool to his touch and soft. She didn’t pull away; she didn’t disappear into the void. She was real.

He ran his fingers along her knuckles, then tugged on her hand until she moved closer to him. He leaned forward and closer still until their breaths mingled and her lips were just a hairsbreadth away. Time froze, and everything around them disappeared as he stared into her eyes. Her beautiful eyes, the color of the sea after the storm, were so dear and... filled with tears.

Were those tears of happiness?

Annalise closed her eyes and shook her head as if in answer. One fat tear streaked across

her cheek. She swallowed and moved out of his reach, taking her heat, her scent, with her.

*No!* Blake thought he yelled the word out loud. *Don't go. Don't leave me.* His panicked gaze roamed over Annalise's features while she composed herself and wiped at her eyes.

And that's when it dawned on him.

She wasn't happy to see him. These weren't tears of joy in her eyes. She was grieving for the betrothal that would never be. The thought sparked an angry chord in his heart. He fisted his hands by his sides and took a deep breath, calming his rioting thoughts.

"You don't seem happy to see me," he observed.

Annalise raised her troubled eyes to his. "Do not be absurd, Blake. We all thought you were dead. And yet... Where have you been?"

Blake noticed that she hadn't answered the question. "Do you love him?" he asked perhaps too sharply because her eyes widened in shock.

"Do I love him?" A beat of silence.

"Yes, Kensington. Your betrothed. Do you love him?"

"Is that the only thing you could think to ask me? After all this time?"

"No, not the only thing, but the first thing. You were going to marry him."

"You disappeared for months. I thought you dead!" she said, her voice breaking.

"It didn't take you long to replace me," he answered, all his bitterness seeping through his tone. "And you didn't answer any of my questions."

Annalise stared at him with wide-eyed disbelief, her mouth slack. She took a couple of breaths to calm herself before she spoke. "I don't want to argue, Blake. You've just returned. And if it puts your mind at ease... Then, no. I do not love him."

Blake nodded. He didn't want to argue either. He was too tired to argue. But he was irritated that she maintained a distance between them. She spoke to him calmly and politely. Not a distressed widow, happy to see her wayward husband, not a woman reunited with the man she loved. She was also not his bright-eyed and open Annalise. Not the way he remembered her. She was too reserved, subdued. What had happened to her?

Blake reached for her again, wanting to touch her skin, to feel her warmth beneath his fingers, to wipe that mask of sadness from her face, but she drew away from his touch.

He curled his fingers, closing on air, and returned his hand to his side, trying to control his temper. Fourteen bloody months without her touch. Why wouldn't she let him touch her now? Perhaps it *was* a dream—a nightmare. One where she was within his reach and yet ever unattainable.

“Where have you been? What happened to you?” Annalise asked quietly, her gaze running along his body.

Blake closed his eyes as he thought of the nights he’d spent in captivity, tortured. About the months on a slave ship, about the depravities he’d witnessed. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, and he shook his head. He didn’t want those memories to assail him. Not now. Perhaps, not ever. He couldn’t fathom what exactly he could tell his innocent wife about what had befallen him either. He cleared his throat. “What I went through is not for a lady’s ears.”

“I am your wife.”

“And that’s one more reason you shouldn’t know.”

She clearly misunderstood his meaning because she reared back before rising from the chair. “If you don’t have anything you wish to discuss with me, my lord, then I shall leave you to rest.”

*My lord.* The words were like a blow to his abdomen. She had never called him that. Not since the night they met.

“Annalise,” he breathed.

She paused, halfway to the door. “I am glad you are back, and I am truly happy to see you alive... Please, call for me if you need anything.” With these words, she shuffled out of the room and closed the door gently behind her.

Blake stared unblinking at the door. Not exactly the joyous reunion of lovers he’d imagined a million times in his head. *Where the devil did it all go wrong?*

# *Love at First Sight*



*Spring 1739*

Annalise stood by the pillar in her parents' ballroom, fanning herself. Two other ladies flanked her—Lady Caroline, the Marquess of Roth's niece, and Miss Olivia, Viscount Landen's daughter. Both ladies were chaperoned, unlike Annalise, whose parents disappeared the moment after her introduction at the ball.

"It's incredibly hot here, isn't it? I wish I could take a break and sit outside for a moment or two. But the next dance is approaching, and so is my suitor," Lady Caroline said on a sigh.

"Well, my parents are too busy flirting with everyone in the ballroom to do anything about the heat," Annalise answered. "My next dance is open. I might slip out to the patio for a moment. Olivia, would you care to join me?"

Miss Olivia Landen vigorously shook her head. "My parents would not allow that. Unlike you, I am ridiculously closely chaperoned. I am looking forward to next year when I shall be free to sit with the spinsters and dowagers and not by the sidelines of a ballroom waiting for suitors to never ask me to dance."

"Don't you want to get married?" Annalise asked with awe.

Olivia talked about the balls as a duty. Sure, it was suffocating, but this was what she'd been preparing for her entire life. Finding a gentleman who'd steal her heart and then marry her and make her the mistress of his estates.

"Of course, I would. But so far, everyone who asked for my hand was either thrice my age or in insurmountable gambling debt," Olivia said while biting on her forefinger. She didn't seem to be able to stand still.

"I've heard Viscount Landen withdrew your dowry to encourage genuine offers," Caroline chimed in. At Annalise's questioning look, she smiled. "I make it my duty to know all things. And if I may offer a piece of advice? If you want to attract gentlemen, you need gowns done to fashion. I mean no offense, and I could help you if you wish. My modiste's the best in town."

"I can barely stand still in this one. The gowns made to fashion make me wish I could crawl out of my skin. And I am afraid a change of gowns would not help. This is my fifth season. The reason I am not married has little to do with gowns and everything to do with my lack of social grace."

Annalise grimaced at the direct way the lady spoke about her failings. She had read society gossip sheets and saw the caricatures about Graceless Livvie, which was what they called Miss Olivia. She was the opposite of what society dictated a lady should be. She talked out of turn, was fidgety and restless, and never remembered faces or names, which resulted in several instances of her committing a faux pas, which, in turn, rendered her unmarriageable by society's definition.

Caroline was the opposite—always calm and collected, always knowing what to say or do—she was perfect. Except she abhorred the idea of marriage and, in her first season, had already rejected over half a dozen suitors.

"Isn't there at least one gentleman who doesn't make you feel awkward and perhaps makes your heart flutter?" Annalise asked Miss Olivia.

Caroline smirked. "Oh, Annalise, you and your romantic notions."

"There might be," Olivia answered, surprising them both. "But since he is yet to propose, I am to remain a spinster until that day comes."

A gentleman bowed before Caroline and offered his arm. Caroline gave her friends a fleeting smile and walked onto the dancefloor.

"Well, the dance has started, which means nobody is paying us any heed. Olivia, would you care to join me on the patio?" Annalise asked, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

Olivia shook her head. "Thank you, but my parents would never allow it."

"Very well, but you will be envious of me in a moment when I am gulping the fresh air," Annalise said with a wink and slipped outside.

She took a deep breath of midnight air and let out a sigh.

This wasn't exactly how she pictured her come-out in her dreams. Somehow, when thinking about a ball, she imagined a magical palace and gentlemen lined up to kiss her hand. She would see the man of her dreams and recognize him as that immediately.

This suffocating room full of old lords and gossiping matrons was not what she had imagined. At least she'd managed to make a couple of new friends. But she wished Lavinia were with her too. A year younger, Lavinia was yet to make a come-out. She'd been left behind in Essex, looking forward to hearing stories from Annalise. Stories, Annalise feared,

which would consist of her standing by the pillar and analyzing her abysmal success.

Annalise's parents would not forgive her if she didn't make an acceptable match in her first season. They'd poured tremendous amounts of money into this season, bought her a trousseau, organized an exquisite come-out ball mere days after her eighteenth birthday. Now it was her time to return the favor and secure a marriage proposal before the end of the season. Thankfully, she still had several weeks to meet the expectations of her parents and form a beneficial alliance.

She was not a wallflower. A few gentlemen had asked for a dance or promenade around the room. Annalise knew all the etiquette rules, and she'd performed them well so far. But she wasn't as perfect as Caroline. She had trouble remembering most of her suitors' names and was mortified to ask them to repeat them, afraid to become the second Graceless Livvie and remain forever a spinster, humiliated by the society gossips.

She took a deep breath again. No need for those thoughts to bother her now. She was alone at last, and she was determined to enjoy it.

"Not the smartest thing for a debutante, to be found alone, unchaperoned on the patio," came a gravelly smooth masculine voice from behind her.

*Or not so alone.* "I am not unchaperoned." Annalise turned to face the stranger. "You are here, aren't you?"

The gentleman laughed, a deep rumbling sound that held her mesmerized. "I am far from a chaperone, believe me. With me around, you need at least two."

"Are you a rake then?" She tilted her head, studying the man in front of her. He was tall, slim, and elegant. He wore a deep green coat and a waistcoat, embroidered with golden thread and matching breeches. His clothing was tailored to precisely fit his build. His skin was snow white, his facial features almost too handsome, his white powdered wig lay about his shoulders in waves. He stepped closer, looming over her, and then sketched a perfect bow.

"Viscount Moore, at your service." He looked at her, his dark eyes roaming over her form in a fashion that made her want to squirm under his perusal.

"Miss Annalise Ardee." She curtsied and ducked her head, hiding her gaze.

"Annalise. What a beautiful name," he said in a low, husky voice. The sound of her Christian name on his lips sent butterflies fluttering low in her belly.

"Thank you," she whispered. "And what is your Christian name?" She was surprised by her boldness in asking that of a complete stranger.

He gave her a queer look for a moment before answering, "Blake."

He stepped even closer, all the while studying her face. Annalise fisted her hands in her skirts to hide their shaking. Her palms were perspiring, and his closeness sent a strange quiver through her body. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her rioting nerves, only to inhale the scent of his spicy, masculine cologne.

Blake reached out slowly, carefully, as if not to spook her, and disengaged her hand from her skirts. He brought it up to his lips and kissed her knuckles with slow deliberation. Annalise's knees buckled, and she wondered how she managed to remain upright and not turn into a quivering puddle.

"Since you're here and not out on the dancefloor, is it sensible of me to assume that the next dance is not spoken for?"

"Actually," Annalise pushed out past her dry lips. She had to swallow before she could continue, for her throat seemed to have a boulder lodged in it. "All my dances after this one are taken."

"We'll have to make the best of it then, shan't we?" he asked with a strange twinkle in his eyes. He took her by the hand and led her back to the ballroom and onto the dancefloor.

"What are you doing?" she hissed between her teeth, but they'd already joined the other couples, and Blake spun her into a dance.

A giggle left her lips as she followed the steps without thought. They were standing opposite each other, dancing the reel, surrounded by other couples. But all Annalise could see were Blake's dark eyes, intensely focused upon her. She smiled, and he reciprocated. Only his smile reminded her of a predatory grin. As if she were prey he was about to claim. Somehow, the thought wasn't as disturbing as it should have been.

He spun her once more, and she laughed in joy. She was probably grinning like a simpleton, but she didn't care how she looked to others as long as Blake kept smiling back at her. Annalise felt the entire world disappearing and leaving just the two of them. Two more bars and the music faded, the dance concluded. Disappointment settled deep in her stomach as they took their bows. Would he seek her out again after this? With that hope, she made to leave the floor, but Blake stopped her.

"We'll dance again," he said, a sparkle of mischief dancing in his eyes.

"But—" She looked helplessly around. "I've already promised this dance to Lord Hexley."

Blake just raised his brow. "Then let him come and demand it."

Annalise's mouth dropped open. "You can't do that. It will lead to a scandal."

"Worry not." He winked at her before looking past her shoulder. "Here comes your



rescuer.”

True enough, Lord Hexley appeared at her elbow. “I believe this is my dance, Miss Ardee,” he said with a bow.

Annalise was about to answer, but Blake interrupted her swiftly. “I am afraid young Miss Ardee feels indisposed at the moment. She has a terrible, erm, headache, and I graciously offered to escort her to the refreshments room.”

At Hexley’s questioning look, Annalise smiled weakly. *What is Blake doing?*

“Naturally,” Lord Hexley grumbled. “Then I shall take my leave.” He put his words into action and left the dance floor, muttering something under his breath.

“What did you do that for?” Annalise watched Lord Hexley leave in astonishment.

“I thought it quite clear,” Blake said. “I wish to have this dance for myself.”

“You can’t!” Annalise exclaimed in horror. “You said you were taking me to the refreshments room, so we better make haste.”

“All in good time, my dear,” he said, and as the music started, he led her in another dance.

A chuckle left Annalise’s lips, but she didn’t protest. She was being reckless; she knew. Dancing two dances in a row with the same gentleman was scandalous enough, but considering the way Blake had taken these dances, there was bound to be gossip that could possibly—no, *probably*—ruin her reputation.

She was afraid Blake wouldn’t let her dance with her following partner either. She smiled inwardly at the thought. Perhaps it was the two cups of ratafia she’d had earlier that made her this impetuous or the intoxicating presence of the gentleman before her. Whatever the reason, she never wanted this dance to end.

At that moment, Blake took her by the hand and tugged her aside. “Come with me,” he said as he retraced their earlier steps and led her back onto the patio.

Annalise giggled like a foolish girl, which perhaps she was. She should have been alarmed by the behavior of this gentleman, but she wasn’t. It felt right following his lead, trusting him with their next course.

“What are we doing back here?” she asked, smiling widely.

“You look quite flushed. I was afraid you were getting hot,” he said and accompanied his words by taking her hand and slowly, sensuously tugging on the tips of her gloves.

Annalise’s pulse fluttered madly as she stared into the stranger’s eyes, unable to look away, unable to pull her hand away, mesmerized by the heat in his gaze.

“I thought perhaps you needed to cool down.” By this time, her glove was completely off,

and he brought her hand to his lips.

He kissed each one of her fingers, then turned her hand palm up and placed a fervent kiss on her inner wrist, ending it on a slight lick. Annalise's lips parted, and her stomach clenched, sending hot waves through her entire body.

All too soon, he placed her glove back in her hand.

"Until we meet again, my darling Annalise," he whispered in her ear and disappeared into the darkness, leaving Annalise flushed, breathless, and confused.

## Chapter 3



Blake lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. This wasn't exactly the reunion he had hoped for. He had dreamed of this moment for fourteen long months, of finally seeing her again, of being close to her again. He'd imagined holding her in his arms a million times. It was the only thing that had kept him sane, kept him alive.

During those dark months, he had always imagined that the moment he stepped into the house, she would fall into his arms, profess her love, and they would live in wedded bliss for the rest of their lives. In his dreams, time stood still as they kissed for hours, and nothing mattered to them anymore.

He hadn't counted on her still being angry with him for the past. The past didn't exist in his dreams, only the future.

He hadn't counted on his own jealousy. Or his temper.

In his dreams, he'd never once thought that she could have moved on, given up on him and their marriage. The notion brought a sharp pain to his temples.

Of course, she'd moved on. It'd been fourteen bloody months. If they all thought him dead, she was considered a respectable widow now. And as a respectable widow, she was free to take lovers to her bed. And the way things had stood between them when he disappeared, she didn't owe him her fidelity. Especially not if she believed him dead.

Suddenly, Blake felt nauseous. How had he not thought of that even once while he was gone? He was insane to think she'd be alone, grieving for him all this time. She was too beautiful to be ignored by society's beaux, too naïve to not be easily seduced. He knew that firsthand, didn't he?

And, of course, she was free to remarry. This thought hadn't entered his mind before, either. Why would she want to remarry? She was young and enchanted by the idea of love when they had met. Perhaps since then, her views on marriage had changed. Perhaps she saw it as a practical arrangement, seeing how he hadn't left her much when he'd disappeared. Or perhaps she had lied, and she had fallen in love with her long-time friend, the Duke of

Kensington. The dark, enigmatic man who had swooped in and promised to make all her problems disappear.

His stomach churned, and he almost doubled over. He rubbed his temples and looked around the room. He turned his head and saw a couple of toasted pieces of bread on the bedside table. His stomach growled at the sight.

*When was the last time I ate?*

He took a bite of the cold toast and settled back against his pillows. It didn't matter. None of it mattered anymore. As long as Annalise was by his side, they could fix everything. He *would* fix everything, and they would be as happy as they'd been at the beginning of their relationship. He had managed to woo her once. He would be certain to do it again.

The cold toast made its way down his stomach, and he washed it down with a sip of water. He wanted more than water and toast. Annalise probably worried his stomach couldn't handle much after he'd collapsed in the ballroom, but it must have been fatigue and an excess of excitement. Now sitting on the bed and chewing the stiff piece of bread, he felt energy surge back into his veins.

Perhaps he could order the staff to make him a sandwich. Or there must be leftover food from the ball. He wasn't picky. Not after the months of famine he had endured.

He jumped out of bed in one swift motion. The sudden movement caused vertigo, and he had to clasp at the bedpost so he wouldn't fall into the bed in an undignified heap. He definitely had to eat something more than a bite of toast. And he needed a bath. What he needed, he thought darkly, was his wife. But she had gone through enough for one night, so he didn't have the heart to bother her.

Blake ambled to the servants' bell. He ordered sandwiches prepared and loaded into the carriage. Next, he dressed with the help of his valet and looked down at himself. His breeches hung at his waist, although they were too tight at his thighs. The shirt was disproportionately snug, too. The waistcoat restricted his movements. He needed to get a new wardrobe. He needed to do a lot of things. First thing in the morning, he would start by figuring out the details of his estate with Townsend. Surely, he'd help him get reacquainted with his business affairs. Then he'd get new clothes.

But one more pressing matter burned at the back of his mind. Something he couldn't delay. So he threw a coat over his shoulders and ambled away from his room.

The moment Annalise left Blake and closed the door to her room, a wave of doubts assailed her. Should she have left Blake alone? He seemed troubled, weary, anxious. Perhaps she should have stayed by his side, held his hand...

Annalise wiped at her face, only to realize tears were streaming down her face. She couldn't reconcile her emotions. When she'd stepped into the room and saw him lying there, her emotional turmoil had almost driven her to her knees.

She had watched the even rise and fall of his chest, studying his features. He had changed, yes. But he still seemed dear to her. Her heart had leaped from the fact that he was near. His scent had filled the room, and his presence had changed the energy around her.

She had wiped at his forehead with a wet cloth and couldn't help but caress his hair. So long now, so dark. She had touched the hard planes of his face. His cheeks were hollow, his skin dark; only his lips seemed unchanged.

Her breath had caught in her throat. His lips were soft and enticing. She'd wanted to kiss those lips and feel his hands on her again.

And then he had awakened. And reality had invaded her girlish dreams.

Where had he been all this time? And why wouldn't he tell her?

Fourteen months ago, she had been packing her suitcases to voluntarily leave him. But when he'd disappeared, she'd almost drowned in her anguish and despair. Seeing him again was like a balm to her broken soul. At the same time, it brought back all those horrid memories.

He had always been secretive, and he had always kept his affairs to himself. It was one of the reasons their marriage—the one that started with a whirlwind courtship—had failed so miserably, so quickly.

Had he run off with his mistress to the islands, faked his demise, and when he got bored, returned home?

That had been one of the most ridiculous thoughts that had ever entered her mind. Well, that wasn't true. She had wondered that for months after his disappearance. Now, however, it did seem ridiculous. Blake didn't seem rested at all. In fact, he looked weary, troubled, on edge. He looked as though he'd performed physical labor for months. And his gaze was wild...

She wished she didn't have to guess. She wished he could have just told her everything, shared his burden, and acted, for once, as though she were truly his wife.

They hadn't seen each other for fourteen blasted months! And even now, he refused to

tell her anything.

And yet, one encounter with him almost had her crawling back to him.

Oh, how she had missed him. His voice, his touch. One glance from his dark, impenetrable eyes, and she was melting before him. One word out of his mouth in his smooth gravelly voice, and she was that naïve debutante again, hopelessly in love with her magical prince.

What a fool she was. After all this time, did she still harbor the hope that they could live happily together? After all the torment he had put her through?

She stepped away from the door and moved to change into her nightgown. He wasn't going to call after her. He never did. She might as well try to get some sleep, although she knew she wouldn't be able to rest.

She called Ruth to help her don her nightgown, and after Annalise dismissed her, she then turned and stared at the door. Should she have left him all alone? After all, he'd just gotten back after fourteen months of absence. Perhaps she was wrong to leave him. Perhaps he needed her.

She heaved a sigh. He would call if he needed her, wouldn't he?

That's what it had always been like with them. She, waiting for his call, while he—the door to his room clicked closed and then there was a sound of his steps stalking out of the house—left her without a second thought.

\* \* \*

"The Shadows." Ford Gunning, the professional thief-taker and Blake's long-time friend, looked at Blake as if he was mad.

Ford was standing in his small study in a dark blue banyan, leaning his hips against the tiny desk, dwarfing it even more with his huge form. He was unshaven, and his hair was mussed, having just been roused from sleep by Blake's rather unprecedented and unexpected appearance. After the shock of seeing Blake alive and well settled in, he'd eagerly listened to Blake's story.

Blake had told him everything. Starting with how he got captured and tortured for information about the Shadows, finishing with how he finally escaped and got back home. He skipped the most gruesome parts of his tale, sticking only to the facts he thought the thief-

taker would find of use.

“Yes, the Shadows, is that a problem?”

“No, not a problem per se, it’s just that....” Ford scrubbed his hand over his face. “They are a myth, Payne. A horror story criminals tell their recruits so they will be careful and not make hasty mistakes.”

“A myth.” Blake scoffed. “Don’t tell me I’ve endured fourteen months of hell because of a boogeyman in a wee criminal’s closet.”

Ford pushed off his desk and went to his sideboard to pour two glasses of cheap brandy. He extended one glass to Blake, but Blake waved the gesture away.

“I do not drink strong alcohol,” he said.

“Since when?” Ford raised a brow.

“Since my return.”

Ford didn’t comment further. “Please, sit,” he said and settled behind the desk.

Blake sat across from him and stared at the amber liquid in Ford’s glass. A little over a year ago, Blake would have ridiculed the drink. He used to be too refined to drink cheap alcohol. Well, he wasn’t anymore. Blake had had worse. And he would have loved to sip on the burning liquid, drowning his horrid memories. But since he returned to England, he swore to himself to never have another drop of spirits. Annalise didn’t like the smell of it. And Blake wasn’t exactly acting like a gentleman when he was foxed. If he were to win Annalise back, he couldn’t afford missteps.

Ford took a sip of his brandy and placed the glass on the desk. “The rumors—or the myths—about the Shadows have existed as long as I can remember. The Shadows are presumed to be this elite force of assassins who worked as Mary I’s spies to eliminate her Protestant opposition. After they disassembled, it is speculated that they continued their training and their work but as mercenaries. If someone needed another person killed or some information gathered, they were the ones to talk to.

“Recently though, and by recently, I mean several decades before either of us was born, new whispers started going around the criminal world. Someone, or rather several someones, donning the attire of the infamous Shadows, started waging wars on criminals. Sabotaging the deals, stealing back stolen goods, burning illegal gin houses, bawdy houses, and other houses of ill disrepute.

“But it’s just rumors and ghost stories, Blake. Criminals are fighting each other all the time in an attempt to establish rule over the less fortunate. Sometimes it’s just bad luck that

gets the bandits, sometimes their own recklessness. But there always seems to be the one person who saw a man in pitch-black clothing standing a few feet away from the incident.” He took another sip and turned to look Blake straight in the eye. “It’s an excuse of an incompetent brigand or a cautionary tale to keep their recruits on alert. Perhaps even a conjuration of a savior by an overexcited maiden. Hope for a miracle, someone who would protect the regular folk where they are unprotected now.” He shrugged and placed his empty glass on the desk with a deliberate clink.

“How do you know that?” Blake tilted his head. “If there are whispers, if there have been whispers for so long, surely there’s something to it?”

“If it were true—if any of it were true—we would have found some evidence by now. Crime has risen in London in the past decades. Especially in the rookeries. It is only natural to hear superstitions. Now it’s the Shadows. Tomorrow they will be ghosts.” Ford waved his hand dismissively. “Besides, what kind of ninny head stands around watching the evidence of his destruction long enough to get spotted but not long enough to get caught? These stories are not true, Blake.”

Blake laughed bitterly. “The thugs who got me would argue with you.”

“They were also sure you were one of the Shadows, weren’t they?” Ford countered.

Blake nodded thoughtfully. Yes, they’d been sure, until their leader came in. Blake didn’t see his face—he wore a kerchief over it. He’d examined Blake’s person inch by inch and decided he was not the one he needed. He got extremely angry with his subordinates and told them to get rid of him. But the thugs had proved incompetent, even in that. *Thanks to the heavens.*

To this day, Blake didn’t know if finding his signet ring was what prompted the leader to let him loose or if perhaps the brigand was looking for something else.

“Is that all?” Blake peered at his friend’s face. “Is that everything they say about the Shadows?”

Ford nodded with a bemused expression. “As far as I know.”

“You’ve never heard of any mark they wear on their body? Something that might identify them?”

“No.” Ford narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

“I think that’s what their leader was looking for. And after he didn’t find it—whatever it was—he became angry that they got the wrong man and ordered me killed.” He shook his head, lost in memory. “He saw my signet ring while he performed the search. Perhaps that’s



the part that got him angry. Whether he had been looking for something else, I do not know. But he realized I was an aristocrat and most likely decided that killing me would be better than demanding ransom. Capturing a peer is as much offense as killing one, so he doubtless thought it wise not to leave the witness around."

"Didn't work well for him, did it?"

Blake shrugged. "I couldn't tell you anything about him if I wanted to. My only lead to him was what you call a myth, and if you're right and it doesn't exist..." He trailed off, staring gloomily into the void.

If he didn't find the men responsible, they'd be bound to come after him again. And he was certain he wouldn't slip through their fingers this time.

"Well, perhaps they don't exist," Ford answered thoughtfully. "But from what you've told me, there's a criminal group that believes in their existence so much that they are willing to kill to find any clues about them."

Blake leaned his hands on the desk and looked into his friend's face. "Then that's how we find them."

Ford grinned, and Blake couldn't help an answering smirk.

\* \* \*

Annalise went down to breakfast the next morning and was surprised to see her husband sitting in his regular place, breaking his fast, perusing the morning paper as if nothing was amiss. She'd walked into his room in the morning but hadn't found him there. Somehow, she wasn't expecting him in the dining room, either.

She paused at the entrance, taking in the tableau before her. Her husband, all fresh and rested, sat at the head of the table. She'd imagined this peaceful domestic scene would be frequent when she had married him. It hadn't turned out that way. So seeing him there now, after everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours—after the last fourteen months—squeezed her heart until it ached.

She had seen her dreams shatter before her eyes once before because of Blake. She wouldn't let him do that to her again. She took a fortifying breath and walked toward her place at the table.

"Good morning," she said, trying to lighten her tone. "I didn't think you'd be dining out of

your room so soon.”

“Morning.” Blake put aside the paper and looked at her, his gaze running over her form. The intense perusal sent goosebumps along the length of her spine. “I am all right. I think it was just fatigue and shock. There is nothing wrong with me and my health.”

A footman brought a plate filled with kippers, eggs, toast, and butter and put it in front of Annalise. He poured her some chocolate and returned to stand at the side of the room.

“Did you sleep well then?” she asked, looking down at her plate.

“The bed is...” He cleared his throat. “It is too soft. I am afraid I’ve gotten quite used to rougher surfaces.”

“There wasn’t a mattress where you were?” She furrowed her brows.

“Not so much, no. How about you? How did you sleep?”

“Well, thank you,” she said as she pushed her food around the plate with her fork.

The fact was, she hadn’t slept well at all. After Blake left his room, she’d tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep. She’d walked around the room, stared out of the window, waiting for her ill husband to come back home. This was all too familiar not to cause her pain.

After she finally saw his carriage return with the first light of dawn, Annalise had lain in her bed, listening to the sounds of his footsteps as he came to his room, performed nightly ablutions, and finally quieted down. She had managed to fall asleep shortly after that, only to be awakened a few moments later by the chambermaid, who came in to stir the fire in the hearth.

Unable to rest further, she got up and walked straight to Blake’s room. Only he wasn’t there. Instead, she found him breakfasting in their dining room as if nothing was amiss.

Annalise raised her head and saw Blake staring at her. She cocked a questioning brow.

“I can’t seem to take my eyes off you,” he said hoarsely, then cleared his throat. “You are more beautiful than I remember.”

Annalise shook her head. “Blake. I do not know how to respond to your flatteries.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’d rather we talked about something more meaningful.”

“The fact that I have missed you is not meaningful enough?”

“That is not what I mean.” Annalise bit her lip and gently returned her fork to lie beside her plate.

“What do you mean, then?” he asked softly.

Annalise grimaced, her heart beating rapidly. He was playing an adoring husband. The man Annalise thought he would be when she agreed to marry him, and this memory, the bitter betrayal she'd endured after their wedding, clawed at her heart.

"I'd like to know where you've been," she said softly. "These past months."

"I told you last night, Annalise. I can't tell you where I've been. I am sorry."

"Why not?"

"Because it's too gruesome, too savage, too horrible to even contemplate, much less put into words. I don't want to burden you with this."

Annalise heaved a sigh. "What would you like to talk about then?"

"How about instead of talking about our past, we talk about our future?"

Annalise stifled a scoff. He didn't want to talk about his own past. Apparently, he assumed Annalise's past didn't matter, either. And the future? What future did they have without circling back to their past? It would just be a repeat of more of the same, and Annalise didn't want the same. She didn't want to relive all that pain. She knew what she had to do if she wanted to avoid it. And since Blake wanted them to concentrate on the future, she would acquiesce to his wishes.

"I suppose since you do not seem to require my assistance anymore, since you are not ill... Perhaps I should move to Sussex, just as I—"

"What?" Blake's question was more of a roar.

Annalise's head shot up, and she blinked at him. "That's what I was planning to do before... before your disappearance."

"But that was in the past. Why would you still want to move out?"

"Blake," Annalise said as softly as she could. "You seem to want to disregard the past altogether, but that's not how it works. I was going to move away because our marriage was far from perfect, and without working through the issues of our past, I don't know how we can move forward."

"We can start from the beginning. A clean slate. Just give me a chance to prove that I've changed—"

"But you haven't." Annalise cried in frustration, then willed herself to calm down. "You haven't. You still leave in the middle of the night to God knows where. You still deem it unimportant to tell me anything about your life. You don't care what I've gone through these past few months, nor do you care about what I want. How do you expect me to believe you have changed?"

Blake scrubbed his face with his hand and leaned back in the chair, looking weary. "I do not mean to keep things from you, I promise. It's just—it's difficult with everything that has happened to me. I wish you could just... stay. We were happy once, weren't we?"

Annalise swallowed, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. The laughter and happiness that had surrounded them during their courtship flashed before her eyes. "I don't remember," she whispered.

\* \* \*

Blake stared at the downturned face of his wife as she struggled to keep her tears at bay. How had it come to this? This wasn't supposed to be his life. Not with Annalise. They were supposed to be deliriously happy, frolicking in the gardens, swimming in lakes, making love on every piece of furniture they could find in the house. Instead, there were silent nights, tense meals, and harsh exchanges.

And he was the one to blame.

He knew that now more than ever. Perhaps he'd always known but suppressed the ugly truth from himself because—what? Because his father wouldn't have considered him to be man enough if he didn't.

He cleared his throat. "Annalise, please, can you look at me?"

She raised her head. *My brave little wife.* He smiled internally.

Blake turned to the footmen standing by the sides of the room. "Leave us."

As the servants scrambled away, he stood and walked to his wife's side of the table and sat in a chair beside her. Annalise blinked up at him with her innocent wide eyes, her lips parted. It took all his will not to bend his head and lick across those pretty lips. Oh, how he wanted to devour her mouth and damn the issues between them.

"I know that our marriage hasn't been perfect," he started, and his wife scoffed delicately. "I know that I've made a mess of things. But I want to make it right."

Annalise stared at him as though he was some kind of specimen she hadn't seen before in her life.

"What would you say if we started from the beginning? I've spent the most hellish fourteen months of my life, and I'd rather forget them. The only way I can do that is with you by my side."

Annalise licked her lips and leaned toward him. "Will you tell me what happened during that time?"

"No," he said, perhaps too harshly because she reared back. "Ask anything, but that."

"How do you expect us to build a marriage when you don't trust me?"

"It has nothing to do with trust." Blake saw her eyes take on a distant look, the one he'd witnessed all too often since the night of their wedding, the one he never wanted to see again. He took her hands in his. "It is too difficult to talk about, darling, trust me. I have been taken against my will—"

"By whom?" Her brows furrowed, her expression turning concerned.

He didn't want to bother her with things she could do nothing about. He was carrying the burden for both of them. Blake wished he could keep her innocent and undisturbed by his gruesome past. His head started to ache.

"I do not know," he finally said. "But I am going to find out. Whatever I went through while I was in captivity... It is too depraved for you to hear. I would rather forget it all, and I'd rather you were unburdened by my past."

"Whatever it is you went through, Blake, perhaps I can help."

Blake shook his head. "These are my demons to fight, my darling Annalise. Please don't ask this of me. Anything but that."

She looked at their joined hands for a moment before lifting her eyes to his again. "All right. I shall concede to your wishes for now. But how do I know it won't turn out exactly the way it did the last time? How do I know you won't—" She broke off and bit her lip.

Blake closed his eyes in agony.

"How about this?" He looked into her eyes again. "How about we make a deal? Give me two months. Just two months to prove to you that I am not going to disappoint you and let you down again. That's how long it took me to court you, wasn't it? And that was also how long it took me to destroy any regard you had for me."

"And if you don't?" she asked with a slight frown between her brows.

"If I don't convince you to stay with me, then I shall set aside a large sum in a trust for you, and you will be free to do whatever you wish. You can leave for Sussex as you planned before my disappearance or travel to Italy as you've always dreamed."

Annalise glanced at him, startled. She obviously hadn't thought he'd remembered. How could he not, when it was the only thing she was excited about when she talked? Italian fables and books, Italian art and music dominated their conversation when they were courting, and

he remembered it all with a smile every time he closed his eyes.

Annalise quickly composed herself, and then she narrowed her eyes on him. "What's the catch?"

*My clever little wife.* "You must promise to give me a fair chance, accompany me to social gatherings, grant me your company during the evenings—" *And nights*, he wanted to say but didn't. It wasn't time. Although that was really what he wanted. "If it doesn't bring us together," he added hastily before she could refuse, "at least it will go a long way in dispelling any gossip surrounding us. It would arouse too much suspicion and unwanted chatter if you were to leave my side right after I came back, don't you think?"

Annalise tugged her hands out of his grip in one swift motion. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding them this entire time. The cold air wafted around his fingers as her warmth deserted him, leaving him feeling bereft.

"Very well," she said, rising from her seat. "It's not as if I have any choice."

"You do," he said vehemently, standing after her.

She smiled sadly at him as if she pitied his gullibility. He didn't like that look on her face.

"I accept your deal," she finally said. "Good day, my lord."

*My lord.* Two polite words like whiplash from her lips. Annalise turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

Blake stared after his wife for several long moments before looking down at the table. Annalise hadn't eaten a bite.

## Chapter 4



Blake spent the rest of the morning closed behind the doors of his study, going over estate details with his secretary. He didn't know how to even start wooing his wife back, but at least he'd won himself some time to try. In the meantime, there were plenty of other issues for him to address. For example, the issue of his earldom, which he had neglected from the moment he came into the title.

Before leaving their household, Townsend had offered his help, and Blake would gladly take him up on it, but he wanted to look at the books by himself first. Blake noticed the estates hadn't suffered in his absence. On the contrary, they'd only prospered. Townsend had invested in some risky ventures, but they'd paid off, and his accounts had soared.

In fact, according to the ledgers, Townsend had nearly tripled his income. In one blasted year. How did the man do that?

Granted, Blake had never paid much attention to his lands. He was a gentleman of leisure. His father taught him only the necessities and bare minimum of what was needed to keep up the good income of the estates. He'd condemned people who invested in business and technology, calling them heathens and saying that it would only harm farming in the long run. He also didn't believe that spending all his time behind books or meandering over his estates was what gentlemen of leisure did.

*Lords of the peerage, he used to say, have a responsibility in Parliament: to make sure the working class remains working and aristocrats remain enjoying their benefits accorded them at birth.*

What a pile of horseshit, Blake thought now. How he could have admired his father and aspired to emulate everything he did was beyond him. He was a complete fool a little over a year ago. The fact that he'd managed to woo Annalise at all was a miracle. Probably attributed to her youth and inexperience. Well, at least he'd done something right in his six and twenty summers of useless existence. Though he'd almost managed to ruin that as well.

The bitter pill to swallow, however, was the fact that his estates had prospered without him; Annalise was happy without him. Everything was better in his absence. He should have

stayed gone.

A knock sounded at the door, and Blake called his butler to enter.

"Lord St. John for you, my lord," Crane said with an inscrutable face.

"Good. Let him in." Blake turned to his secretary then. "We are done for today. Thank you. Please, report back to me on the morrow at the same time."

Just as the secretary bowed out, Blake's best friend, Jarvis, Viscount St. John, slunk into the room.

"Blake!" he exclaimed from the doorstep before stalking farther into the room with purposeful strides. "I thought I'd see you sprawled on the bed, sick as a dog, yet here you are."

He extended his hand, and Blake jumped up to shake it.

"Glad to see you," he said jubilantly. "It's been too long."

Jarvis grinned at him. "Maybe for you. I just saw you last night. Quite a dramatic entrance, if you ask me."

Blake laughed. He'd missed his friend. Jarvis was always good-natured and ready with a jest. He indicated for his friend to sit and walked toward the sideboard. "Would you like something to drink? Brandy?"

"Brandy's good. Now tell me. Where the devil have you been hiding for the past year? If not for Annalise's betrothal, would you even be here?"

Blake studied Jarvis from the corner of his eye. Did he really think Blake had been intentionally hiding all this time, or was it another one of his jests? He decided to take him at face value. "A total coincidence, I assure you. Or a providence of God if you'd like to believe that instead."

He took both glasses of amber liquid, extended one to Jarvis, and sat back behind his desk. He swirled the brandy in his hand. He poured it out of habit, but wasn't about to drink it. However, having it by his side soothed his mind. "I was seized and kept prisoner against my will."

"By whom?" Jarvis didn't look surprised.

In fact, he seemed completely unperturbed. Perhaps it was because that's what everybody already suspected.

"I don't know," Blake said dryly and placed his glass on the desk.

Jarvis frowned and took a sip of his own drink. When he put it down, he looked Blake over. "You've changed. I almost didn't recognize you. What have you been doing? Where were they holding you? Judging by the tone of your skin, it wasn't in a dungeon."



"It's a long story." Blake made a dismissive gesture with a wave of his hand. However, he should have suspected this wouldn't deter his friend.

Jarvis settled comfortably in his chair with a great show. "I am not in a hurry," he said and raised his eyebrow in defiance.

Blake closed his eyes and swallowed against the horrifying memories. "There's not much I can tell you. I was seized after I left Hades gambling hell that night. Surely, you remember. I'd had a fight with Annalise earlier and was in a dark mood." Blake remembered the events of that night vividly. He'd played them out thousands of times in his head. "I was tired, but you didn't want to leave yet. You said to take your carriage and instruct it to return for you because you wanted to stay a few more hours."

Blake looked down at his drink. Somehow, staring into the depths of a glass of brandy made it easier to talk than looking at his friend's face.

"I don't think I ever reached your carriage," he continued with a sigh. "I think I was hit over the head because I lost consciousness for a while. In fact, I still don't remember exactly where they grabbed me and how. The last thing I remember is exiting the hell."

"You didn't." Jarvis's voice penetrated his thoughts, and Blake was forced to raise his eyes again. "Reach the carriage, that is. I didn't know that at the time, but you never reached the carriage." He heaved a sigh. "When I came out of the hell, it was several hours after you walked out. I found my carriage where I left it, but I assumed the driver took you back home and returned for me, per your instruction. It wasn't until a day later when I came to call on you that Annalise said you'd never returned from our previous outing. She wasn't worried. In fact, she was preparing to leave on a journey, I believe, although I do not remember where. She said it wasn't the first time you were away for several nights at a time."

Blake closed his eyes against the dagger-like pain those words inflicted on him. He knew exactly where Annalise was going and why. Away from him, because he had acted like a total arse. Hearing just how much he'd hurt Annalise that by the second month of their marriage, she was used to his absences and was ready to leave him, grated more than he was willing to admit to his friend.

"But then I talked to my driver to find out where you went after the gambling hell, and he said he never saw you that night."

Blake nodded. It made sense. If he had been taken from the carriage, everybody would have started looking for him. Perhaps they'd have been able to find him. But there was no way of knowing that for sure, and he didn't want to dwell on what-ifs.

“When I came to, I was in a dank, filthy basement by the port. I don’t know exactly where. I’ve never found that out. I don’t know how long I was out before I woke up, or even if it was the first time I woke up after being taken. The only thing I remember is the smell of moldy stones and the sounds of waves. Perhaps I’m misremembering. It was a confusing time. I was drugged and beaten.” He shook his head and looked down at his hands. “Then, it got worse. They wanted some information, something I knew nothing about, but they didn’t seem to believe me or care. They just... delighted in torture.”

“What did they want to know?” Jarvis asked with a wince, and Blake just shook his head.

For some reason, he wasn’t comfortable telling Jarvis the entire truth yet, that he was tortured on account of a boogeyman. It was painfully embarrassing.

“Some nonsense. I don’t recall. I was out of it most of the time, and I had no idea what they were talking about.”

“How long did they hold you? Don’t tell me you’ve spent all this time—”

“No,” Blake interrupted hastily. “No. Once they realized they would get nothing out of me, their leader ordered them to kill me. Instead of doing me in there, as I thought they would, they”— he paused and swallowed—“they sold me to some slave ship. I suppose I was worth more that way, rather than dead.”

Jarvis blinked at him as if startled, lost for words, and Blake laughed bitterly. “What followed was five agonizing months at sea. Taking beatings, cleaning other men’s shit, slaving away. Long story short, I and a couple of others managed to escape. We jumped overboard near one of the Indian ports and swam for the shore.”

Of course, it wasn’t as easy as that. The memory of his escape still haunted him to this day. The entire ordeal did. He shook his head. “It wasn’t smooth sailing after that either; we didn’t have any clothes or money. But we were lucky enough to get hired on one of the British cargo ships. Unfortunately, it was sailing a long way before returning to England. But at least we had food, a roof over our heads, and were not slaving anymore. It took me seven months to get back to England. You know the rest.”

Jarvis scratched his jaw. “And you have no idea who did this to you?”

Blake just shrugged. “No. However, I did go see Ford, the thief-taker, last night. He will know where to start looking, I am sure.”

“The thief-taker.” Jarvis let out a snort. “I doubt he’ll be able to help. He didn’t find you then either, did he? Besides, it’s not much to go on if you don’t remember what information they wanted from you. I’d suppose the start would be to question Hades. But we tried that

before. Nobody is able to get anything out of the man.”

Blake frowned. Hades was what everybody called the owner of the hell Blake and Jarvis had been in the night of his disappearance. The man was a criminal and held power over half the city, including most of the high society. His clubs were aptly named Hades, and since nobody knew his real name, people chose to call him the same.

“I don’t suppose he’ll be ready to confess.”

“No, of course not.”

Blake brought his drink to his lips. The smell of brandy hit his senses. One part of him wanted to take the drink and soothe his raw nerves, another part of him knew he had to give up the habit. He sighed wearily and placed the drink back down.

He didn’t want to talk about this anymore. Of course, he would do anything to find the bastards and make them pay. The idea that they would come after him again shook him to the core. But talking to Jarvis about it wouldn’t yield any results. Perhaps, it would only drive him to drink again. But he couldn’t allow that to happen.

His mind, however, kept working at the mystery of who the culprits might be.

What if the thugs who took him were hired to do so? What if the man behind the curtains had nothing to do with them and just paid the blokes to get rid of him? In that case, they could have used the Shadows tale to try and throw people off his trail. On the off chance that his enemy was clever and cunning enough to anticipate Blake’s escape, he might have concocted the story of torturing the information out of Blake, all the while having other nefarious plans for him.

Blake furrowed his brows as he stared into his glass. Or perhaps the Shadows story was for the thugs’ benefit. Not a lot of criminals would go for seizing and torturing—much less killing—a peer. If found out, they would be prosecuted under the penalty of death. So they could have used the bandits’ nightmare story to control the thugs while needing Blake dead for some other reason. And that opened—

“What are you thinking?” Blake was distracted from his thoughts by Jarvis’s gruff voice. “You seemed like you were contemplating something very grave.”

“Actually, I was thinking about what we might be having for supper this evening.” Blake forced a smile. “I haven’t eaten a hearty English meal in... well, in over a year now. Today’s breakfast notwithstanding. Would you care to join us?”

Jarvis flashed his characteristic, charming smile. “I would love to, but I suppose you and your wife need some catch-up time.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and roared with

laughter.

*If you only knew.*

Jarvis stood and clapped Blake on his shoulder. “No need to stand on my account, old man. I’ll see myself out. You’ll tell me if you need anything, won’t you?”

“Of course.” Blake nodded and sat back in his chair, watching his friend leave.

His earlier gloomy thoughts came back to him now as he sat there contemplating the vacant seat in front of him. If indeed his disappearance had nothing to do with this Shadows business, then perhaps he ought to look at the people who’d benefited most from his demise. He lowered his head and absently looked through the ledgers. Townsend was definitely at the top of that list.

Blake moved slightly away from his desk so he could access one of his drawers and took out a bulky leather journal. He flipped it open to a fresh page, dipped his quill into an inkwell, and scribbled at the top of the page:

*Possible plotters behind my capture:*

1. *Townsend. Motive: Earldom.*

He tapped the quill against his chin, squinting at an unseen point at the farther side of the wall, thinking. Then returned to the journal with a new entry:

2. *Kensington. Motive: Annalise.*

He thought a while more before dipping his quill in ink and scribbling for the third time:

3. *Jarvis. Motive: unknown. Suspicion basis: last person to see me.*

He swallowed as he looked over his writing. This wasn’t much to go on. More than that, he’d just written down three people who were arguably the closest to him. Well, perhaps not Kensington. They were friendly but not close friends. Kensington was a lot closer to Annalise and obviously cared about her a lot.

Blake eyed his name and motive for a moment before taking up his quill again. With much hesitation, he wrote down another name:

4. *Annalise. Motive: freedom.*

# The Courtship



*Spring 1739*

The clock ticked loudly on the mantelpiece of the drawing room, measuring away the allotted fifteen minutes. A good portion of those fifteen minutes had already passed, yet Annalise's suitor, Lord Norfolk, had yet to say a word. He'd cleared his throat about a dozen times, cleaned his glasses, and shifted in his seat, but so far, he hadn't spoken.

Annalise sat on the settee, her hands demurely folded on her lap, a blank look in her eyes, and a fake smile stretching her cheeks. She thought her face was going to crack in two if she had to smile any longer. Why did he even bother to call on her if he had nothing to say to her at all? Although perhaps she should have been more grateful that anyone sought her out after her behavior at the ball the night before.

The main reason for her irritation was not the suitor currently occupying her drawing room, however. It was the suitor who had not shown up at all.

Annalise peered at the clock again, hoping the arrow would move faster than it did.

Her mother nudged her discreetly on her side, and Annalise heaved a sigh.

"Beautiful weather, isn't it, Lord Norfolk?" she asked with a strained smile.

"Indeed." The man grinned at her and continued staring at her in silence.

Annalise briefly closed her eyes and prayed for patience. "Did you enjoy the ball last night?"

"Oh, absolutely," the laconic man answered and smiled.

Several more beats passed. Annalise stifled a yawn.

"Would you like to go for a ride in my barouche tomorrow afternoon?" the man finally asked, and Annalise was tempted to groan.

No, she wanted to yell and run away from the room. And she would do so too if her mother was not sitting on the same settee as her and looking at her sternly.

"It would be my pleasure, my lord," Annalise answered tightly.

Norfolk stood, looking pleased with himself, and made a few steps toward Annalise. He

took her hand and placed a slobbery kiss on her knuckles. Annalise restrained the urge to twist her hand away, unpleasant shivers running up and down her spine.

As Norfolk bowed out and left the room, Annalise collapsed against the back of the settee with an audible sigh.

“Why are you acting like this?” Her mother narrowed her eyes on her. “Norfolk is of suitable descent. He is absolutely agreeable and would be perfectly suited for you. It was your first ball. You have a perfect gentleman visit you today despite your abominable behavior, and all you do is sulk! You should be grateful, you—”

Her tirade got interrupted as the butler knocked on the door and entered the room.

“Flowers for Miss Annalise,” he said with a bow.

The next moment, a dozen footmen filed into the room carrying vases with beautiful dark red roses. Annalise’s mouth dropped open, and she rushed to smell and touch them.

*Could it be? Are they from him?*

“A note, my lady,” one of the footmen said and extended her a short missive.

Annalise smiled brightly as she opened the note, but her eyes widened as she read it. It had four simple words.

*Look out the window.*

Annalise picked up her skirts and scrambled to the window. She saw a phaeton in front of her house, with two gleaming mounts. A man stood next to the animals, a hat in his hand, a smile on his lips. *Blake*. The man she had been waiting for the entire afternoon.

“Mama, another suitor!” she exclaimed and giggled uncontrollably while running toward the door.

“The visiting hours are over,” came the bewildered voice of her mother behind her, but Annalise wasn’t paying attention anymore. She was hurrying down the stairs.

Annalise flew into the front hall and was about to flee from the house only to come to a halt as the stately figure of her father stepped in front of her.

“No running like that in the house, young lady,” he said harshly. “Especially not to meet a gentleman who couldn’t be bothered to call during the acceptable visiting hours.”

“But, Papa—” Annalise tried to peek behind her father and see if Blake was still there.

“I shall talk to the young gentleman outside, and if he wishes to court you, he’ll have to do it in a manner propriety dictates.”

“But—”

“No,” he said harshly. “He either courts you properly or not at all.”

Annalise downcast her eyes and took a step back. Her mother appeared from behind her at the same time and ushered her back to her room.

The next day, Annalise sat in a barouche next to Lord Norfolk with a grimace of quiet resignation on her face. Her father had kicked Blake out the day before, and she hadn't heard from him since. She had hoped he would send her a note or call on her the next day, but he didn't. She flipped her fan open and closed several times, looking at the crowds of people around them. Other barouches stopped by their side occasionally. The occupants exchanged gossip and idle chatter and moved on.

It was a beautiful, sunny day. She was out in the park with a suitor, like she had dreamed thousands of times before. She should have been happy. But her mood was sour, and she was counting the seconds until this outing was over. At least Norfolk had spoken a few sentences today. She supposed it could have been worse.

Annalise heard the loud hoofbeats of an approaching mare before a rider caught up to them and slowed down to match their speed.

He took off his hat and bowed with a flourish. Annalise turned and froze, warmth unfurling in her chest, a genuine smile appearing on her face.

"Miss Annalise." Blake leaned in, took her hand, and bowed over it. Annalise's hand tingled at the contact. "Norfolk." Blake gave a brief bow.

"Moore." Norfolk parroted the action.

"What beautiful weather, wouldn't you say?" Blake grinned at Annalise, and she bit her lower lip. "I would say it is perfect for a short stroll," he continued.

"I am perfectly comfortable in my barouche," Norfolk answered, and Blake raised his brow at Annalise.

Her eyes widened for a brief moment before she made a decision. "I would love a stroll."

Blake flashed her a wide smile, cantered ahead, handed his reins to Norfolk's groom, and slid off the horse. He then walked to the side of the barouche, opened the door, and offered his hand to Annalise.

"What are you doing?" Norfolk barked, sounding confused and irritated.

"Taking Miss Annalise for a stroll," Blake said, seemingly unperturbed, and gave Annalise a wink.

Annalise stretched her arms toward him, and he handed her down.

"Here, now, Moore! This isn't done!" Norfolk protested.

But Annalise wasn't listening to his sputtering anymore. She was distracted by Blake's

dark brown eyes staring straight into her soul and by the warmth of his hands holding her by the waist.

When she hit the ground, she was breathing heavily, her cheeks flushed, her eyes frantic. Blake held her a little longer than was strictly necessary or proper. He then offered his arm and turned to Norfolk.

"Nothing improper is going on, Norfolk. I invited you both for a stroll, and you refused. You wouldn't deprive a lady of a walk because of your stuffiness, now would you?"

"But—"

"Thank you for agreeing to watch over my mount for me. We'll be back in a flash." With that, he turned and ushered a giggling Annalise away.

They walked a few paces in silence. Finally, Annalise looked at him from beneath her eyelashes and said, "I didn't expect to see you here. Or at all, for that matter."

Blake grinned as he looked at her. "Your father might have inadvertently mentioned yesterday that proper suitors show up on time and invite ladies out for a ride in the park in advance. Like the—*oh, so respectable*—Lord Norfolk, who did just that. So, I've decided to join your rendezvous."

"If anybody noticed my defection from Lord Norfolk's barouche, there will be a scandal."

"Oh, I do not doubt it." Blake grinned at her wolfishly.

They greeted a few couples promenading in the park before Blake looked around and suddenly led her away to a narrow path among the trees.

"Where are we going?" Annalise giggled as they hid away from the afternoon crush in the park.

"Do not fret, my dear. I shall have you back in a jiff."

He stopped a few feet away from the main path and turned Annalise so she was standing with her back against the tree, facing away from the crowd. She should have been alarmed. Blake's behavior was less than gentlemanly, but she couldn't find it in herself to be bothered. The truth was, her heartbeat accelerated and her cheeks grew flushed the moment Blake was anywhere in the vicinity, and it seemed like all the heat turned her brain to mush.

He leaned closer to her then, and she licked her dry lips. His gaze immediately dropped to her mouth.

"Miss Annalise," he said in a husky voice. "Would you do me the honor of allowing me to court you?"

Annalise bit on her lip and looked at him through her lashes. "Would you do it in a proper



fashion?" she asked, her voice breathy.

"Absolutely not." He looked into her eyes, and Annalise felt as though he stared right through to her soul.

She swallowed. "Then absolutely yes."

Blake dipped his head and took her mouth in a scorching kiss.

## Chapter 5



Music flowed around Annalise, surrounding her with beauty, peace, and love. She'd always felt peaceful when she played. This new melody struck a special chord in her heart, however. It reminded her of Blake.

The tragedy, her sorrow, and everything else they went through seeped out of her fingers and onto the keys of the pianoforte. The precious moments between her and Blake passed before her eyes. Their first meeting, the courting, the betrothal ball. The happiness that had been too fleeting. And then came the cold season of winter. The stormy nights spent alone in bed, worrying about him and worrying even more if he'd been spending those nights with another. The way he'd changed right after marriage had cracked her fragile heart, but what had happened later had broken it to pieces.

So immersed was she in the hauntingly beautiful melody and in the sorrows of her own thoughts that she hadn't noticed anyone enter the room. It was only after she tapped the last key on the pianoforte and the echo of the note stopped reverberating through the room that she felt a presence behind her.

Annalise stiffened and turned slowly. A tear streaked down her cheek, and she wiped it away discreetly before raising her head.

Blake stood in the doorway, one shoulder propped against the doorframe, his arms folded on his chest. He was in his shirtsleeves, no coat, waistcoat, or cravat, sleeves rolled up on his forearms, displaying his arm muscles and his bulging chest and shoulders.

Blake had always been a large man, but he had never been muscular, not in the way he was now. His forearms were dark and tanned, and a couple of veins popped under his skin. Annalise forced her eyes to meet his gaze. His face was thoughtful, almost tragically so. His wide lips puffed out—as they always did when he was lost deep in thought—his eyes narrowed. What could he be thinking about? As the silence stretched between them, Annalise started to feel uneasy.

"Is there something you wanted?" she asked, just to dispel the tension between them. It

hadn't quite worked, because his gaze intensified on her.

"Is that original?" He tipped his head toward the pianoforte.

Annalise turned back at the instrument before returning her gaze to his. "No. It's Antonio Vivaldi."

"Let me guess. Italian," he said with a grin.

"Yes. It's one of his latest and less popular works. At least on this side of the English Channel, I don't know if it's well-received in Italy." She paused. "I personally think it's hauntingly beautiful."

"Very," Blake said without taking his eyes off her.

Annalise cleared her throat, uncomfortable under his intense perusal. "I heard it once and couldn't get it out of my head. But I couldn't find the sheet music for it anywhere." She clamped her lips shut, wishing she hadn't said anything at all.

"How did you find it?" he asked and stepped inside the room. He walked slowly toward Annalise, looking around.

Annalise licked her lips. "Kensington brought it to me as a betrothal present."

Blake halted in his tracks. His head snapped back to look at her. Annalise sat still, waiting for his jealous diatribe, but there was just silence.

"It's called 'L'inverno,'" she whispered. "Winter."

Blake unclenched his jaw with an effort and resumed looking about the room as if seeing it for the first time. "You've redecorated here," he said, circling the room with his gaze.

"Yes," Annalise said tightly. "A month after we married."

"A month—" His gaze returned to hers, puzzled at first, then she saw as the realization dawned on him.

She'd decorated this room while he was still in London. While they were still, technically, honeymooning. Or at least they should have been.

He came closer and then swung his leg around the bench and sat astride, facing her. He was sitting so close that his inner thigh brushed against her knee, and his breath stirred the wisps of hair at her temples. His closeness, after such a long time spent in loneliness, sent pleasurable shivers down her spine. But with pleasure came the sense of uneasiness, discomfort. What did he want from her?

"I love to listen to you play," he said and brushed a tendril of hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. Annalise felt another shiver pass through her, just as she felt a tingle low in her belly. "Did I ever tell you that?" Blake's voice turned low and gravelly.

She knew he'd done it on purpose. But why? Was he trying to seduce her?

"No," she answered before swallowing hard.

His eyes followed the ripple in her throat, then ventured lower, and Annalise felt her pulse quicken.

"I was an idiot," he said, still staring at her bosom.

She was wearing a regular day gown, but it had a low-cut neckline, and she felt naked under his intense perusal. Perhaps, she should only wear gowns with high necklines from now on. At least until she got used to Blake's presence in the house. The way he looked at her was as if he wanted to devour her.

It was a pleasurable feeling, to be wanted again, to be admired. She had wished for that every day after their wedding night. She wasn't ready for that now, though.

Blake finally lifted his gaze back to her face and raised his hand as if to touch her again, but Annalise flinched, and he stopped mid-motion. He closed his eyes in agony as he swore and stood from the bench.

"I thought we might want to start attending social events," he said, walking back toward the exit. "Start dispelling some rumors, show up together, smile politely at the lords and ladies." He stopped at the door and turned back to her.

"I think you're right."

"How about a ride in the park? Tomorrow."

Annalise wanted to refuse. Her instincts screamed at her not to trust him. But she'd promised to give him a chance. And even if she intended to keep him at arm's length, she needed to keep her promise.

She cleared her throat. "I think it will go a long way toward dispelling some rumors. You need to be prepared, though. People will ask a lot of questions."

"Do not fret. I am versed at steering the subject to other pastures."

*Yes, I am well aware.* "An afternoon in the park is a good start. But we received many invitations for the upcoming gatherings. And they've doubled since your return. Would you like to take a look at them and decide which social engagement will be our first one to attend?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "I am not certain I am the best person to do this. How about you pick a gathering you'd like to attend? I am convinced you'll do far better than me."

Annalise smiled tightly. "I shall think on it. I also think it is important for us to host a ball. To celebrate your official return home."

"Hmm." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You are right. Perhaps about a month from now?"

A month wasn't a long time to prepare for a ball. But it would give her something to do with herself besides agonize about Blake's return.

"As you wish," she said.

Blake gave a swift smile. He paused then, hesitating at the door. "I would like to ask you another favor. I know I do not deserve it, but I'd like to spend more time with you if you'll allow it."

"What do you mean?"

"When we just married, one of the things that drove us apart was that we barely saw each other."

*And whose fault was that?*

Blake grimaced uncomfortably as if he'd heard her thought. "I am not asking for much. Just your company during the morning meal and supper."

Annalise licked her lips. Perhaps it wasn't much for him, but it meant too much for Annalise. It was all she'd wanted of their marriage back when it just started. But he rarely spent evenings at home and even fewer mornings. On the rare occasions he spent nights home, he came in so late that he slept through the morning meals. But it wasn't like Annalise had anywhere to go. So she conceded.

The meals were not the most frightening part of living with Blake, though. There was a question that had plagued her from the moment they struck the deal. She wished she didn't have to ask, but a mix of hope and distress settled in the pit of her stomach.

"Do you... Do you plan on coming to my bed?" she asked, her voice trembling.

She didn't know which answer she dreaded more, yes or no. But she'd rather hear it now.

He narrowed his eyes on her as if trying to decipher her thoughts. "Not unless you want me to," he finally answered.

She swallowed. "Not just yet."

"It might be winter in our relationship right now," he said and tipped his head at the pianoforte. "But spring will come, eventually." He turned on his heel and walked away.

*Not just yet.* The words rang in his mind as Blake entered his room. They haunted him as he performed his nightly ablutions and settled into his soft, warm bed. He lay there awake, running every interaction he'd had with Annalise since his return in his mind.

When Annalise had asked him whether he was planning to come to her bed, her face was vulnerable, her eyes full of doubt.

Blake couldn't fault her, really. The only two times he'd come to her bed, he hadn't been exactly gentle, nor had he been eager to please. Hell, he hadn't even been sober. Blake was determined to make her forget those sordid memories and replace them with pleasant ones. Blissful ones.

He listened to the sounds coming from her bedroom as she prepared for bed. The light dimmed, and he turned to see that his bedside candles were burning out. How many candles had he gone through since his return?

He sat up and massaged the tense muscles of his neck. He was fooling himself. He wasn't going to sleep in this bed tonight either.

Blake picked up the candle and sauntered out of the room. He entered the study, lit more candles, and grated the hearth. The brighter it was, the better he would feel.

When the night came, his mind always drifted to the darker memories. He tried pushing them aside and thinking of Annalise, but the darkness, the loneliness, had an unwanted effect on him.

Well, if his mind insisted on remembering the horrid events, perhaps he could make use of them. He took a sketchbook and a pencil, settling on the settee in front of the hearth. His mind revolted at the idea of remembering someone who'd inflicted terrible pain on him. It was over a year ago, and he had been under extreme duress at the time, and as good as Blake's memory usually was, it didn't cooperate now. But he had to.

If these people knew Blake was back, they would undoubtedly try to get to him again. This time, they would probably just kill him and throw his corpse in the Thames. And this was a best-case scenario.

What if they hurt Annalise instead?

No. He wouldn't let that happen.

He rotated the pencil in his hand and started sketching. The only thug he remembered clearly was the one who came to him the most. He was burly and tall. He delighted in torturing Blake, and his voice was stuck in Blake's head. But as he started sketching him, his face eluded him. It was covered in shadows.

It didn't help that every time Blake tried to recall his captors, he remembered all the things they did to him. His breathing grew shallow, and sweat started appearing on his forehead.

His vision blurred, and the light flickered in the room. Blake fought to keep his eyes open, but it was a struggle. His chin lowered to his chest, and his head grew heavy.

Suddenly, Blake felt the burning sensation on his skin. Then his blood slowly dripped down his chest. Blake opened his eyes and saw as the thug applied more pressure on his flesh with the knife. His shirt was missing, and his chest was shredded to ribbons and covered with blood. Blake's breathing turned frantic, and he clamped his lips shut so as not to cry.

"He won't talk," came the gravelly voice of a thug in front of him. The man bent at the waist and peered into Blake's face. "Are you awake, mate?" he asked right to his face, a nasty, rotten smell wafting from his mouth.

Blake grimaced in disgust.

"He's awake, all right," the thug told someone behind him.

As the bandit moved, Blake saw a silhouette of a man in front of a small window. A few strands of light were peering through, outlining the man, but shadowing his face, so it was impossible to make out what he looked like. The man took a step forward.

Sweat dripped from Blake's forehead into his eye, and he blinked, his vision blurring in front of him.

"Take his tongue then," came a familiar cultured voice.

Blake narrowed his eyes, trying hard to make out who the silhouette belonged to. The thug laughed like a madman at the words. He stepped in front of Blake and took his face in his dirty hands. He held Blake's neck at an uncomfortable angle, prying open his mouth. Blake clenched his teeth together and clamped his mouth shut, trying to twist away.

"Don't fight it, Blake," the voice came from behind the thug.

Suddenly, everything changed. The dirty bandit disappeared, and the lights started flickering in the room as if the wind was blowing out the torches. *What is going on?*

Blake cocked his head to the side as the man by the window stepped into the light, revealing his face. *Jarvis*.

"If you won't talk," he said slowly. "Then we shall have to alter our approach."

He tipped his head to the side. Blake turned, and his eyes widened in horror. Annalise, dirty and bloodied, was tied up to a chair in front of him.

Blake tried to scream, but his voice wouldn't come out.

He jerked awake and sat up on the settee.

The sketchbook fell from his lap to the floor with a loud thump. Cold sweat ran down his forehead. His breathing was heavy and irregular.

He was back home. It was just a dream.

He looked around to make certain everything was where it was supposed to be. He was in his study, and Annalise was peacefully sleeping in her bed. His hand instantly went to the locket and he rubbed it between his fingers.

He stood, his neck muscles aching from the uncomfortable position he'd spent the night in. He needed to see Annalise and make certain she was all right. That dream had frightened the devil out of him.

Was it even a dream? Or was it part of his memory resurfacing? Could the man behind his capture really be one of his best friends?

And would he, or whoever his captors were, dare to take his Annalise, now that Blake was back? He wouldn't let that happen. No matter how things stood between him and his wife, he had no intention of letting her out of his sight.

He jerked his head toward the mantelpiece; it was half-past noon.

*Damn.* They were supposed to spend the morning meal together. How did he expect to keep her safe when he couldn't even keep his promises? He had been looking forward to sharing a meal with her, feasting his eyes upon her the first thing in the morning, bathing in her light and innocence. Instead, he'd probably alienated her again.

Blake readjusted his banyan, scrubbed his face with his hands, and ventured out of the study. He hurried toward the dining room, and the moment he opened the door, almost collided with Annalise.

She started with a squeak and put a hand to her chest, panting. Her eyes were wide, her mouth slightly open.

"Good morning," Blake rasped and cleared his throat.

"Good morning."

"Are you already done with breakfast?"

"Yes, Blake. It's afternoon," she said accusingly.

"Apologies. I-I didn't sleep well and..." He raked a hand through his hair. "Please forgive me."

She raised her brow, then dropped her gaze to his rumpled appearance.

"I shall make it up to you. I promise," he said with a smile, but Annalise gave him a look



full of doubt.

He couldn't fault her. In a way, he was proud of his wife, that she didn't let him off easily. After all, when was the last time he kept his promises?

"Do you want to reschedule our outing in the park?" she asked.

"No," he said hastily. "Do not reschedule. I'll have some coffee, change, and we can go. Will you meet me downstairs in an hour?"

Annalise gave him a reluctant nod. "Of course," she said and walked away.

Well, that wasn't the enthusiastic response he was hoping for, but that would have to do.

\* \* \*

They rode in silence all the way to the park. Blake seemed distracted and on edge. Something was definitely bothering him. But it's not like he would tell her what that was. When they were courting, Annalise had an illusion that she could talk to him about anything. She thought once they married, there would never be silence between them.

Oh, how wrong she'd been, how naïve.

Blake cleared his throat as if he heard her thoughts. Or perhaps the deafening silence between them bothered him, too.

"What are your plans for the rest of the day?" he asked.

"Caroline, the Marquess of Roth's niece, holds a nuncheon every Tuesday." Annalise paused and then added with an apologetic smile, "Ladies only. I do not want to miss today, because I can imagine I shall spend all afternoons starting tomorrow entertaining callers. I can guarantee we shall have our drawing room full of town gossips after this outing. Everybody must be intrigued by your sudden reappearance."

Blake grunted and rubbed his jaw. "I hadn't thought about that. The ride through the park might not turn out as peaceful as I expected."

"Probably not," Annalise agreed. "But you are right. It will go a long way to dispel any unsavory gossip that might be going around about you. About us."

At that moment, they passed through the park's gates and turned toward the South Carriage Drive. The park was not packed yet, but there were carriages rolling in every minute. Soon there would be no place to swing a cat, much less for a carriage to pass.

Annalise spun her parasol anxiously in her hands and put on a bright smile. Her wayward

husband was back home, and she needed to convey the impression of a radiant bride.

“Do you know,” Blake said conversationally as he slowed the barouche, “this is the exact spot where I decided you would be the lady I married.”

Annalise turned her round eyes on him. “Here?”

Blake nodded. “When we met for the first time during your come-out ball, I was intrigued by you. I wanted to see you again, but you know how that went.” He smirked. “I wasn’t exactly respectable, especially not in your father’s eyes.”

Annalise smiled. Her father was against the match from the start. He had said Blake wasn’t the gentleman ladies married; he was the gentleman ladies had affairs with. Annalise’s mood turned sour. Her father wasn’t wrong about that. It wasn’t until she threatened elopement and her mother was having conniptions that the baron finally gave them his blessing.

“And he was right,” Blake continued. Annalise looked up at him, startled. One side of his mouth kicked up in a smile. “When I came to see you that day, my intentions weren’t exactly honorable. I was looking for a dalliance.”

“You never told me that.”

Blake shook his head. “It wasn’t worth mentioning. That day, when I intercepted you here with Norfolk... I was certain you wouldn’t join me. I just came here to make myself known, to make my interest apparent. But you hopped out of Norfolk’s carriage without a second’s thought.” Blake’s face lit up in a radiant smile. “By the time your toes hit the ground, I was irrevocably in love.”

Annalise’s heart made a tiny leap. He’d never told her that either.

“And there”—Blake pointed to the right—“is the place where I kissed you for the first time. Such a scandalous lady you are.” He tsked and smiled at her.

The same smile she remembered from before, his eyes twinkling with merriment, softening the hard edges of his face. He turned the barouche slightly out of the way of the traffic and halted the vehicle.

“Would you mind repeating the experience?” He turned to her and offered his hand.

Annalise looked at his upturned palm, and laughter bubbled out of her. “You must be jesting.”

“I am utterly serious.”

“Well, I am a respectable matron now. I cannot go around kissing gentlemen in the woods now, can I?” Annalise raised a brow at him, her cheeks heating, her heart fluttering in

excitement. Oh, how long it'd been since she spent an afternoon flirting with a man.

"If you don't go with me now, I shall kiss you right here. In front of everyone." To put words to action, Blake scooted closer to her on the seat.

"Blake, no. People are watching!" Annalise laughed and swatted at him playfully.

Blake caught her hand and slowly brought it to his lips. "If you insist on being proper," he said against her glove. "I shall have to act wicked for both of us."

He kissed her knuckles, her wrist, then moved higher up her arm. A tingly sensation ran up and down her spine. Her heartbeat accelerated, and she had to clench her thighs for an unknown ticklish feeling settled low in her belly.

"Payne!" A loud male voice interrupted Annalise's frantic thoughts. *Thank God!*

Blake raised his head, winked at Annalise, and turned to the intruder. His face immediately blanched, and he froze. Annalise craned her neck to see who had startled her husband so. The sun was against them, so the gentleman's face appeared shadowed. He moved, and she finally saw that it was Viscount St. John, Blake's friend. He stopped by the side of their barouche on horseback.

"Jarvis," Blake finally pushed past his lips.

"Lovely to see you out and about. Excellent choice for your first public appearance. Well, second, if we count Kensington's betrothal ball, which we shan't." He finally turned toward Annalise and bowed. "My Lady. Lovely to see you."

"Pleasure is all mine, I assure you." Annalise gave him a tight smile and returned her gaze to her husband.

Blake was acting strangely. St. John was one of his best friends, and yet he was stony and tense. Perhaps he was just annoyed that he'd interrupted their flirtations, but Annalise suspected there was something more to it.

Blake was just about to say something when another barouche stopped beside them. An elderly couple tipped their heads toward Blake. "Payne! Welcome back to London. Do tell us, where have you been hiding all this time?"

Blake briefly turned a regretful smile toward Annalise, and she just smiled in return. The rest of the afternoon would be spent in a similar vein: greeting strangers, recounting the same stories over again.

No more flirtatious gazes, no more kisses.

Annalise was glad for the interruption. She told herself that even as her stomach dropped in disappointment.

## Chapter 6



As Annalise left for her nuncheon the next day, Blake welcomed Townsend into his study. Townsend had come to collect the rest of his belongings. He was moving back to his mother's townhouse until he found other lodgings for himself.

Blake didn't know where he had spent the previous two nights, and he didn't ask. He had offered his cousin a room here, so he didn't have to move around a lot, but the young man refused, citing not wanting to disturb the privacy of a newly reunited couple.

Blake was glad for the answer. He was loath to have Townsend witness the actual state of the relationship between him and his wife.

However, while Townsend was in the house, it was a perfect opportunity to go through the ledgers. Blake needed help to make heads or tails of the current situation on his estates and with his finances. And it would also help Blake understand whether Townsend could be in any way responsible for Blake's disappearance.

"I noticed you made a few changes to my staff," Blake said, sitting across from his cousin. "For one, you've dismissed my solicitor, Portsmouth."

"Among others, yes, that's correct," Townsend answered, unperturbed. "The man was skimming from you. He, the stewards, and the land managers all stole from you and divided the cut."

"How did you come to that conclusion?" Blake frowned.

"I checked the ledgers. Apparently, they've been doing it for years."

"For years?" Meaning they've been stealing from his late father as well.

"That's right. And they felt they were untouchable. They thought they could get away with it unscathed."

"And they would have. If it weren't for my disappearance," Blake grumbled.

"I am sure you would've eventually caught on," Townsend said in an offhand manner.

"And I'm sure I wouldn't," Blake muttered under his breath.

If it wasn't for his capture, he would have neglected his lands just like his father

apparently had. Blake shook his head in wonder. He remembered how he had worshipped his father and wanted to be just like him. Now, remembering all his father's teachings, all his father's doings, he couldn't understand why. All he saw was destruction. And Blake had been heading in the same direction. If he hadn't got conked on the head one too many times by the bandits, he would have turned into his old man by now.

"You've done an excellent job," Blake said to his cousin, still leafing through the ledgers. "I believe you've made more profit in a year than Father did in his entire life."

"That's because he didn't make any." Townsend shrugged. "Look, Payne, I can help you with all this if you need. I care for the estate and the tenants, and I am not going to abandon them or you to an unknown fate. And that is why I am here."

"But?" Blake raised his head and looked steadily into his cousin's eyes.

"I am glad for your return, truly. I am happy you are healthy and ready to take on your responsibilities. However, I thought I was building a future for myself. Turns out, I wasn't. And I worked hard and made sacrifices toward that future. So I'd like to get back to building my own life as well. Otherwise, I don't have a chance of ever having a family of my own."

"Do you have financial problems, then?" Blake cocked his head to the side. If Townsend was in trouble before he inherited Blake's estates, it would definitely put him higher on his list of suspects.

"Yes," Townsend croaked out. "After the death of my father, my mother and I were both dependent upon the generosity of the late Lord Payne. But as you can see, he didn't have a lot to share."

Blake bit the inside of his lip. Townsend blamed Blake's father for his misfortunes, then. Perhaps even Blake.

"So, I took it upon myself to try and turn my leisure into labor," Townsend continued. "I know your father was of the opinion that labor was for a lower class, but some of us couldn't afford leisure. I painted, sold my art, acquired quite a collection from my earnings, and auctioned it off to make some profit, so I could do it all over again. But after I inherited the title, I put everything I had into this endeavor. I needed to succeed in this, to make this profitable, to make it so I could care for the people depending on me. And now that you are back, I am at a loss. Again. And I need to care for my mother and her seven cats."

"Seven cats?" Blake frowned in incomprehension. What did cats have anything to do with it?

"Apologies, my mother's cat bore six kittens last night. I am a bit shaken by the

experience. Feral little things too. Now I not only have my family to worry about but this cat's family. And since we don't have many servants... But I digress. You don't need kittens by any chance, do you?"

"No, I really don't."

"Too bad. I wouldn't want to drown them, but I might have to. Or next year, we shall have eighteen of them. Apologies for veering off-topic. This was just fresh on my mind."

Blake cleared his throat. "Yes. Well, I studied the books before your arrival, and I've noticed that you invested quite a large sum of money at the very beginning. That was how you managed to turn a profit. Where did you get the money from if you were in tight straits?"

Townsend shifted in his seat. "I sold my art collection. And my own paintings. Selling my own art was how I managed a living before. But as I inherited the Payne title, I couldn't continue my art machinations, so I put it to better use."

Blake nodded. "Townsend, I understand your predicament, believe me. And I am grateful that you've managed to make the Payne title profitable again, and I shall repay you for that. Gladly. Let us work out a deal. You help me get the hang of my newly found responsibilities. Help me keep up with your novelties and investments, and I shall buy your art collection back for you. I shall even invest in your future projects. It is what you've sacrificed for the estate; it is what you deserve."

Townsend's eyes widened. "You'd do that?"

"I'd do that." Blake nodded. "It is just, after all, and I am all for finding justice."

\* \* \*

"Annalise, what a surprise!" Caroline called.

Annalise turned as Caroline entered the drawing room, held out both arms, and smiled. "I thought I wouldn't see you for days, possibly weeks, now that your husband has returned."

Caroline looked Annalise up and down as if searching for some sign of trouble. Well, she wouldn't find it on her clothing. Annalise's troubles consisted of her inner turmoil. But then, she'd never told Caroline about the true state of her marriage. She'd never told anyone aside from Lavinia, but the high society had a way of finding out. As an unmarried lady, however, Caroline was kept in the dark from the most unsavory gossip.

"I just wanted to see you and let you know not to worry about me," Annalise said with a

smile. "The last time you saw me, I was such a mess." She shook her head.

"Come, let's sit." Caroline led her to a settee and sat next to her. "I ordered some sandwiches and tea. I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I am starving."

Annalise stifled a laugh. For a very lean and fit lady, Caroline ate a lot. Poor Lavinia always envied that. She ate almost as much, but she kept getting softer and rounder, while Caroline stayed the same.

"How are you, dear? How is your husband?"

"I am well. Not perfect, but as well as can be expected. Aren't Lavinia and Olivia going to come too? It's time for a nuncheon, isn't it?" Annalise looked around for a clock but couldn't find one in the large room.

"Lavinia sent a note with her apologies today. She said she came down with a cold."

Annalise frowned. She doubted that what Lavinia had was a cold. She worried that her friend's father was in one of his moods again. Since he'd remarried a few years ago, things had become better for Lavinia. Her stepmother, although not much older than Lavinia, seemed to have a way to draw attention away from her stepdaughter, but it didn't always work.

"What about Olivia?"

"Oh, she should be here any minute. But you know Livvie, she's probably going to be late," Caroline said with a smile.

Ever since Annalise's come-out, she, Caroline, and Olivia quickly became friends. They were all extremely different, but that's what made their meetings interesting. Lavinia had turned the trio into a quartet a year later. And even though Annalise was the only married lady of the four, they still had a lot more in common than Annalise would have thought.

"It's good that you are here, though," Caroline continued. "It gets quite boring."

"How is your uncle?" Annalise asked.

The ladies started a new tradition of visiting Caroline every week for nuncheon, because Caroline's uncle, the man who raised her, had become quite a recluse lately. Ever since then, Caroline, a social butterfly, was stuck in the house most of the time.

Caroline was an outgoing and lively young lady, and Annalise couldn't fathom how being stuck at home like this affected her spirit with no one to talk to but the servants and her elderly uncle. The only entertainment for Caroline now was the rare balls that her uncle, the marquess, attended or hosted. Annalise felt lucky that the old man had even agreed to attend her betrothal ball. Without Caroline, she would've fallen apart even more.

"He is well. But he found a new activity—hounding me to get married."

Annalise blinked. An unusual request from a man who never let his niece out of the house these days. How was she supposed to find a husband? She knew Caroline's views on marriage, though. This was something she'd avoided wholeheartedly since her come-out.

"And you still don't want to?" she asked carefully.

"I don't see the reason to. I am well provided for by my uncle. And even in case of his eventual demise, I am to inherit a fortune. I don't see the need to give my husband my entire fortune, the lands, and my freedom. I can take care of myself."

"What about children?" Analise frowned. The thought of never having children of her own frightened her to death.

"I don't want children. Being all round and heavy for most of the year, then giving birth, then..." She paused and grimaced. "God knows what comes then, but I don't think it's pleasant. And then you have to do it again and again until your husband has an heir and a spare and possibly one more. And if you have daughters, it's a never-ending cycle, unless, of course, you die and—" She stopped abruptly as she raised her head to Annalise's face and finally saw her grimace. "Oh, my apologies. I know you want children, and it's probably not a terrifying notion to you. But I have always feared the unknown."

Annalise gave her friend a look that said that she wasn't fooled for a moment.

"All right, maybe I am not afraid of the unknown, but I am afraid of being split apart as the babe comes out of my—" She clamped her lips shut. "Anyway," she continued in a more composed tone of voice, and Annalise shouted with laughter.

"Oh, Caro, you lift my mood with your peculiarities."

"It's not a peculiarity," she said defensively. "Why women want to experience such a thing is beyond me." She shuddered theatrically.

"Children are a blessing."

"To you, maybe." Caroline raised a brow slightly. "But not to their nurse who has to listen to their constant whining and crying, has to feed them, bathe them... Do you know they can't even sit up until they are about—I don't know, maybe a year old."

Annalise laughed again. "That is not true. You clearly have not spent any time with children. And how do you know about shouting and crying and everything else you described?"

"Mrs. Pelham told me."

"Your chaperone?" Annalise widened her eyes.



Caroline's chaperone, a proper little old spinster, never seemed to talk, much less scare a young lady with such gruesome details.

"Her sister has eight children. I believe that was the reason Mrs. Pelham herself doesn't have any, although she'd never admit it. She actually tells the stories of the mayhem at her sister's house as if it's a blessing."

Annalise bit back a smile. "I shall wait for Olivia to join me so we can describe the merits of motherhood together."

"How would either of you know?" Caroline asked in an offhand manner. "You don't have children, and Olivia is not even married!"

Annalise's heart squeezed at her words, and she decided to change the subject. "You were saying your uncle wants you to marry?"

"Yes, he's become a little... paranoid. He is sure that he will be gone soon, and I shall be left all alone in this world, without protection. He is shoving one suitor after another at me. Even went so far as to draft a betrothal contract! I keep telling him I don't need protection; I have my inheritance." She shrugged nonchalantly, but Annalise knew that thinking of her uncle's inevitable demise wasn't easy for Caroline.

The marquess was like a father to her. He'd inherited the title from Caroline's father when Caroline was but a babe. He took her in and raised her as his own. Annalise knew Caroline loved the man. She also knew it wasn't out of the possibility that the old marquess might pass soon. He wasn't too old, only a little over fifty, but his mind was not sharp anymore, and he indeed became paranoid. He was always looking around, acting overly cautious, afraid to speak with other people in the vicinity. During the last few months, he'd hidden out in his room most of the time.

And although Caroline joked and rolled her eyes when she recited the story, Annalise knew that inside, her friend was hurting. For the life of her, she didn't know what words of support to offer. She sympathized with her friend, but she also knew that a young lady's life, even the life of an heiress, would not be easy without a gentleman's protection. It opened a lot of opportunities for dishonorable men to take advantage of her.

"If anyone can take care of themselves, it's you," she said instead with a soft smile. At least that part, she didn't doubt for a moment.

The door opened then, and a butler appeared. "The honorable Olivia Manning," he proclaimed.

Olivia entered and hurried toward them. "Good, you haven't started yet. I have a

tremendous favor to ask!" she said in lieu of a greeting.

Olivia had never been good with small talk, one of the reasons she did so poorly on the marriage mart. But that didn't matter to the ladies currently occupying the drawing room.

"Good to see you, Olivia!" Caroline stood and offered Olivia a seat. "Please, sit down. The sandwiches should be here shortly, and we are discussing my marriage prospects."

"Oh, truly? I didn't think you wanted to get married."

"I don't. My uncle, however, has other plans."

Olivia turned to Annalise. "Apologies, Annalise, I am so winded I didn't even greet you. I didn't think you'd be here today due to your husband's return. Are you well? Is Payne well?"

"Yes, he has recovered and is ready to make his first appearance at a *ton* event."

Caroline perked up suddenly. "Surely you will want to make a grand appearance!" she exclaimed. "And my ball is coming up on Sunday. It is the perfect opportunity. If you show up with your husband after he appeared so dramatically at your betrothal celebration, my ball will be a huge success. Every person in London will attend just to see the two of you together."

Annalise laughed at the opportunistic thoughts of her friend. That was Caroline, always taking advantage of any situation, good or bad. "Your balls are always a success."

Caroline waved the flattery aside. "Promise me," she said vehemently, "no public appearances before my ball."

Annalise laughed. "All right, I promise."

At that moment, maids came strolling in with tea, sandwiches, and biscuits.

Caroline turned to Olivia after she poured the tea. "You had a favor to ask?"

"Right." Olivia spun her cup between her fingers, unable to keep still. "Remember, a long time ago, you told me that if I had a gentleman in mind, you would help me in picking out a perfect wardrobe that would help me ensnare him?"

Annalise's mouth dropped open. "Who is the gentleman?"

Olivia grimaced. "I don't want to say. At least, not yet. Please, I just need help with my wardrobe."

Caroline frowned. "I shall gladly help you, of course. But the wardrobe will not be enough. We can help more if you let us know who this gentleman is."

"I know. But as long as you help me with my appearance, I have a plan for the rest."

Annalise and Caroline exchanged curious glances.

"All right," Caroline conceded, and then she visibly perked up. "Oh, I shall make certain

you will have a new gown in time for my ball. Mrs. Deville, my modiste, is a miracle worker. One time, she prepared three gowns for me in two days. She will put all other work aside.”

“Well, this is exciting!” Annalise exclaimed. “It looks like this year, both of you are officially on the marriage hunt.”

“In that case, I am the prey,” Caroline said, and the room filled with laughter.

\* \* \*

Blake came home to find that his wife was still out. He wondered if she was avoiding him. If that was the case, then he would have a hard time getting her back. How in the world was he supposed to make it up to her if he didn’t see her? And if he were honest with himself, he had no idea how he’d start making it up to her, even if she were present.

He had been a major arse for the most part—no, for the whole part—of their marriage, the time he was away notwithstanding. But Blake still had hope in his heart that she’d managed to retain some of the regard she’d held for him.

The sound of a carriage distracted him from his thoughts. Then there were sounds from the main hall, and Blake stepped out to greet his wife. She smiled at the butler as she walked into the hall and handed him her gloves, pelisse, and a bonnet. Her smile faltered the moment she looked up and saw Blake standing in front of her, but she quickly put it back on. A feigned smile.

“How was the nuncheon?” he asked.

“Good.” Annalise lowered her head and walked past him.

“Did you decide on our itinerary for the week?” he asked after her.

Annalise threw him a glance over her shoulder. “As a matter of fact, yes. The Marquess of Roth, Caroline’s uncle, is hosting a ball on Sunday. And I promised Caroline we shan’t attend any social events before then.” She started up the stairs.

Blake followed in her steps. “Splendid, are we to spend the evenings at home, then?”

She stopped abruptly and turned, obviously not realizing how close he stood to her. Blake, failing to halt on time, almost ran into Annalise. She swayed, and he grabbed her by her upper arms so she wouldn’t fall.

She looked up at him, her neck bared, her breasts almost brushing the front of his shirt. Heat simmered inside him, collecting at his crotch. His cock instantly got on alert and ready.

His wife was too enticing for her own good. It didn't help that he hadn't had a woman in over a year.

Her lips were parted, and her chest was heaving from the run up the stairs. Blake wanted to lower his head and suckle on her lips. He would take her in his arms, kiss her slowly, leisurely, then sweep her off her feet and throw her into the bed. He wouldn't rush it, though. He wanted to taste her. Slowly. And he wanted to pleasure her the way he'd never pleased anyone.

She stepped back slowly and disengaged from his arms. Her breathing was still accelerated. Perhaps she felt the heat too. She shook her head. "I didn't realize you would be spending your nights home," she said, sounding distracted.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asked with a frown.

She looked away without saying a word. Her silence screamed louder than any words. *Because you never did.*

His heart immediately broke into a million tiny pieces. How could he have hurt her so much? How could he have been such an arse to such an innocent flower?

He raised his hand to brush her cheek with his fingers. She watched him warily, so he lowered his hand. Blake didn't want to see her flinch away from his touch. He didn't want her to think he would take the liberties he wanted. He wanted her to trust him. To crave his touch, as he did hers.

"I have no intention of leaving this house without you, unless on business," he said. "I know I've hurt you in the past, but I have no intention of doing that either."

Annalise gave him a pitying look. Blake ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Annalise, I meant what I said. I want to win you back. I want us to go back to the way things were before our marriage. Before..." *I ruined everything.* He didn't have enough courage to say it out loud. "I do not deserve your forgiveness. I know that. Or even the benefit of the doubt. I've failed you too many times to count. But I shall try to make amends. And I hope you decide it is enough."

He lowered his head slowly, afraid to spook her, hoping she wouldn't flinch away from him. When she didn't, he kissed her chastely on her cheek. He drew away and paused a few inches away from her, breathing her in, delighting at the closeness. Annalise raised her eyes to his. It took all his self-control not to lower his head again and take her lips in a demanding kiss. He straightened instead.

Annalise gave a tiny nod and scurried away.

Blake took it as a good sign. The first step toward the renewal of their relationship. He walked away while fortune was still on his side. He'd see her at supper and try to make a second step.

\* \* \*

Annalise decided not to come down to supper that night. She'd promised to join him during the meals, but she just couldn't see him again so soon. Earlier in the day, while standing by the staircase oh-so-close to him, all she wanted to do was lean into him, feed on his strength, feel his embrace, feel his lips on hers and smell his dear scent. Because no matter what had happened between them, she still considered his scent one of the most comforting things in the world. She was a fool.

So she pleaded a headache and stayed in her room instead. Her inner turmoil could be qualified as a headache, she was sure, or perhaps it was worse.

Blake had said he didn't deserve her forgiveness, and she knew he was right. The problem was, her body didn't seem to know that. Every time he was close to her, her traitorous body responded to his nearness, to his heat in the most disturbing ways.

If she spent more time in his company, she was certain she would give in to his charm and wind up in his arms again.

Only nothing good ever happened in his arms. As much as Annalise wanted to have children, her heart still ached from the two times he'd actually come to her bed.

So Annalise had a quiet supper in her room, took a bath, and prepared for bed. She was sitting by the hearth and brushing out her hair when a soft rap sounded on the adjoining room door.

"Come in," she called and braced herself for a confrontation and Blake's righteous anger because of her absence during the supper.

Blake entered the room as large as life and dark as night. He'd shed his coat, waistcoat, and cravat, so he was only in his breeches and shirtsleeves. He braced one of his shoulders against the doorjamb and folded his arms over his chest. His sleeves were rolled up, showcasing his muscled, tanned forearms. Her gaze traveled lower. The breeches he wore strained over the muscles of his thighs.

He was so different, this burly, giant man from the soft and elegant husband she knew,

that sometimes she wondered if he was truly Blake. There were so many differences in his appearance, he might as well have been another man. She swallowed and returned her gaze to his face, her own face heating in embarrassment. She was wantonly ogling him. It couldn't have been at all proper. Fortunately, he was looking at some point about her shoulders and didn't pay attention to her wandering eyes.

"Did you want something?" she asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"Your hair," he said, a transfixed look on his face.

"Pardon?" Her eyes widened. He wanted her hair?

Blake shook his head as if to clear the fog before his eyes. "I have never seen your hair unbound," he said in wonder.

Annalise placed a hand on her locks and lowered her eyes. That was true. She had always bound her hair during the day and wore a nightcap during sleep. The only times her hair was unbound were in the bath or when she was brushing it out. She instantly dropped her brush and started collecting her hair into a bun.

"No." Blake reached her in two long strides and took her hands in his. "Don't. I like it like this."

"Oh." There really was nothing she could say to that.

He settled next to her in front of the hearth and picked up her brush. "Do you mind?" he asked, gesturing with the brush toward her hair.

He wanted to brush it? Her lady's maid brushed her hair daily but having him do it felt... intimate. She swallowed and nodded.

He slowly moved behind her and took a thick lock of her hair, running it through his fingers. He stopped at the edge, brought the brush there, and started brushing it out, slowly making his way up. He was holding her hair tenderly, as if it were treasure, and moving the brush so softly, as if in worship. Annalise had forgotten that he was capable of such gentleness.

The sound of the brush going through her hair, her husband's gentle ministrations, and a pleasant feeling of the brush massaging her scalp had Annalise lost in bliss. A few moments later, she felt her eyelids closing and her body relaxing.

Blake's fingers brushed against her shoulder as he collected her hair at the base, and she stifled a moan. He adjusted his position so he could reach more of her hair, and she felt his breath at the nape of her neck, making her shiver in pleasure. She had a barely containable urge to lean against him and marvel at their closeness. The heat in her cheeks had nothing to

do with her sitting by the fire anymore. She felt hot all over, and butterflies were fluttering low in her belly, making her want to squirm.

All too soon, Blake lowered the brush to the side and got off the floor. Annalise looked at him wide-eyed, part of her wanting to scream at him to stay.

He stood rigid, his hands fisted at his sides. Blake exhaled one more time, readjusted his breeches at his crotch, and walked back to the door.

"I just wanted to make sure you felt better," he finally said after clearing his throat.

"What?" Annalise stared at him, not quite recovered from their encounter yet.

"Your headache," he reminded with a smile.

"Oh, yes, much better." She bit on her lip.

"Then shall I see you at breakfast on the morrow?"

Annalise licked her lips. "Yes."

He turned to leave, but Annalise wasn't ready to let him go yet.

She was like two different people when he was around. One was cautious and wary and wanted to keep him at a distance. And the other was desperate for his touch, his kiss.

"Wait," she said and scrambled to get up.

Blake paused at the doorway, watching her with a surprised frown on his face. Annalise went to her vanity, opened a jewelry box, and picked up his signet ring. She came closer to him and extended her hand.

"I received a note declaring your demise together with this ring a few days after your disappearance." She swallowed, the memory of the horrid day assailing her. She shook her head to dispel the image. "Townsend, when he inherited the earldom, refused to wear your signet ring. Another one was made for him... I kept this one with me."

Blake stared mutely at the ring for a long moment. He finally reached for it, slowly, hesitantly, then took it, his fingers brushing against Annalise's skin. He didn't put it on, just stared at it, frowning.

"I thought you might want it back," Annalise whispered.

"Thank you," Blake finally croaked out. He hid the ring in his fist and gave Annalise a soft smile before walking away.

## Chapter 7



Annalise sat in the drawing room, staring out the window, pretending to embroider. She hadn't slept well the past few nights. She lay awake half the night, listening to her husband prowling in his room back and forth from wall to wall. It sounded as if he was agitated or anxious.

Annalise always tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep for a long while before she heard the door shut in his room and his footsteps receding and stalking away from their family wing.

Where did he go in the middle of the night? She didn't hear the horses' hooves or a carriage being sprigged, so he either left on foot or he didn't leave the house at all. Did he have trouble sleeping, or was there something else bothering him? Ever since she'd handed him the signet ring, his mood had changed.

They had meals together, but there was no teasing, and he was unusually quiet. This morning he'd said he had a few business affairs to take care of today, and in a way, Annalise was glad he did. It gave her time to resolve her own feelings.

Annalise took a deep breath and concentrated on her embroidery.

A knock sounded at the door, and she looked up to see her butler standing in the doorway.

"Lady Lavinia is here to see you," he said and inclined his head.

"Oh, good. Please, let her in and tell the housekeeper to bring us some tea and pastries."

Annalise lit up from the inside with joy. She'd sent Lavinia a missive after the nuncheon at Caroline's and asked her to call on her as soon as she could. The fact that she came so soon made her expel a breath of relief. Perhaps her friend was doing well.

"Annalise!" Lavinia exclaimed the moment she walked in.

She was as bright as sunshine and as comforting as a mother's embrace. Well, at least as comforting as a mother's embrace should've been, Annalise thought wryly as she stepped into her friend's arms and hugged her tight.



"Oh, I've missed you!" Annalise said and gave Lavinia one more squeeze.

"You did? But you saw me only a few days ago." Lavinia laughed, and they both settled on the settee.

"I missed you at Caroline's nuncheon," Annalise said pointedly.

Lavinia grimaced. "Father was home and not in the best of moods; I just didn't want to get in his way."

"Clever," Annalise said and patted her friend's hand.

"Enough about me. How is everything? Is Blake feeling better?"

Annalise nodded. "He is. In fact, he was up and about that same evening."

"Hmm." Lavinia frowned. "How are things between you?"

Lavinia was the only person who knew the real situation behind Annalise's relationship with her husband. Since they grew up together on neighboring estates, they were practically like sisters. Annalise had never held anything back from her, and likewise, Lavinia shared everything with Annalise.

Lavinia scooted closer to her, and Annalise looked down, feeling hesitant. "Well, it's been odd," she said before looking up. "He... The first night home, he asked if we could have a proper marriage, the one we should have had from the start. A loving, trusting relationship. Basically, to start from the beginning."

"He did? What did you say?" Lavinia turned more fully toward her friend, giving her full attention, and Annalise relaxed, happy to unburden herself.

"What could I have said? I said I didn't think it possible." She huffed a breath. "Then he asked me to give him just one more chance. Another two months to try to win me back and dispel all the society gossip at the same time. If by that time, I still maintained that our marriage had failed, I'd be free to go to Sussex and settle down there by myself. Just like I had planned before, only with an allowance from him."

"He said that? He'd let you go if you so wished?"

Annalise nodded. "All I have to do is give him two months to make things right." She shrugged and looked away.

"And will you?"

"I don't know. I said I'd give him a chance, but I am not certain I want to. Every time he is near, my entire body tingles. My senses are heightened around him. I see clearer; the world is brighter, I feel lighter, I... I think I'm still in love with him."

Lavinia bit her lip. "You can't force your heart to feel differently, dear."

"My heart is an idiot." Annalise gave a huff and stood. She started pacing in front of her friend. "How many times does he have to let me down for my heart to finally realize that he's not safe?"

"Is he not?"

Annalise halted and rounded on her friend.

Lavinia grimaced. "I just mean... It's been a long time. Perhaps he has changed."

"That's the most frustrating part!" Annalise cried. "I do not know. And he doesn't say where he's been or what he's been through. He seems different, feels different. You know how he was, always drunk, always away. Now he just looks... haunted."

"Haunted?"

Annalise nodded and returned to her seat. "He absolutely refuses to talk about the past... Which, of course, means he hasn't asked about mine either. He doesn't even mention Kensington anymore, apart from the one time when he'd just woken up."

Lavinia grimaced and placed her hand on Annalise's. "Does that mean you haven't told him?" she asked softly.

Annalise's smile turned bitter. "No, dear. I don't think I can. I don't think it would make a difference either."

Lavinia licked her lips. "Perhaps, you can use this two-month reconciliation to your advantage. I know you still want children. I also know you need Blake's help with that. I cannot imagine how you feel being around him again, but if he's insisting on spending time together, perhaps you can gain something from it, too. If you leave two months later, it could be with a babe in your belly."

At that moment, the maids came in with the trays of food, and Lavinia's eyes lit up.

Her friend's distraction let her wallow in her own thoughts for a bit. It's not like she hadn't thought about a babe. She wanted to have one badly. But being alone, isolated in Sussex, with a growing belly... She didn't know how she felt about that. The thought just gave her a headache.

When the trays were settled between them and they armed themselves with brioches and a cup of tea, Lavinia spoke again. "There's actually something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" Annalise raised a brow behind her teacup as she sipped her tea.

"Since you are not marrying Dane anymore..."

Annalise put her cup down with a clink. "No," she said in disbelief.

Lavinia looked away. "I just mean... He is free, right?"

"Lavinia!" Annalise's mouth fell open a notch. "Didn't you tell me that you were done with the girlish infatuation? That you were never truly in love with him? I would never have accepted his proposal if it weren't so!"

"And that is exactly why I told you all that."

Annalise's eyes watered, and her throat started to smart. "Lavinia, dear. Please, tell me you didn't talk the man you're in love with into marrying me!"

"I didn't talk him into anything, I just mentioned your predicament, and he was the one who came to the rightful decision."

Annalise stared at Lavinia, frozen with her eyes wide and her mouth half-open.

When Blake had disappeared, Annalise was left alone, destitute, desperate, and... in a delicate condition. She'd just found that out a day after Blake's disappearance, and a few days later, she told Lavinia about her woes. The next day marked the first time Kensington had proposed to her.

It wasn't exactly a proposal. He said he would be willing to look after her and the babe, whatever may come. And if Blake didn't return, he would be willing to take her as a wife. Annalise had been rendered mute. The last thing she could think about at that time was being married again. Her first marriage had barely begun and had caused her nothing but pain. But she also held out hope that Blake would be back and that the babe would bring them closer together.

Annalise swallowed. What had happened next was too horrible to think about. She'd lost those dreams on the day Blake's signet ring arrived with the missive denoting his death.

"Dear." Lavinia's voice brought Annalise back from her dark memories. "At the time, you needed a friend, a strong and powerful friend."

Lavinia was right. In a day, she became a widow without a stipend, as Blake had not arranged for one. Her parents would not take her back, she knew. She would have died on the streets, alone. And in the state of mind she was in, she wouldn't even have minded that.

But everything had turned out differently. Blake's heir, Townsend, had sheltered her and made certain she would want for nothing. Kensington had shielded her with his protection. And apparently, her best friend had given up the man she'd loved her entire life for her.

"You shouldn't have done that," Annalise said with a frown.

"Well, I knew he wouldn't marry me, anyway. It was a useless dream to hold on to. Besides, I love you both. And I would rather see you two together."

Annalise didn't know what to say. At that time, she had been too wrapped up with her own problems to recognize what Lavinia was doing. Now it all made a lot more sense.

"Well, moving on from that," Lavinia continued. "Now that Kensington is free, and he still needs a duchess... I just thought that maybe... Oh, I don't know. Do you think if I went to him and asked him to take me as his wife, he'd agree?"

Annalise almost spewed the tea out of her mouth. "You want to go to him and ask for his hand in marriage?"

"Well, he is not going to ask me. I might as well seize the opportunity. I did it for you, and it worked."

Annalise bit her lower lip and placed her cup delicately on the table. "Is that really what you want, Lavinia? He does not love you. Not the way you love him. And as much as it might hurt, can you imagine how much harder it would be to live with him all your life knowing that he will never love you back?"

Lavinia sank deeper into the settee. "You don't know that. He can grow to love me."

Annalise's gaze ran all over the room, not finding a place to rest. She sympathized with her friend. But Kensington had known Lavinia most of his life, and if he didn't love her now, would he ever?

"Lavinia," she said at last. "I just don't want you to get hurt. You deserve a man who will appreciate that he has you, not someone who will look upon you as a duty."

"You were ready to marry him," Lavinia grumbled.

"Yes, but I was content with a loveless marriage, and I don't think that's what you want. I don't think you're ready for the type of heartbreak that comes with living with a person who doesn't love you back." Annalise didn't mean to sound bitter, but that's exactly how the words came out.

Lavinia lowered her eyes. "I apologize. You have your own problems to worry about, and here I am dumping my issues on you."

"Oh, no, Lavinia, please. Never think that. We've been friends all our lives, and your problems are never and will never be less important to me than mine."

"Thank you, dear." Lavinia placed her hand on top of Annalise's and squeezed it lightly.

"You don't have to thank me for loving you, dear." Annalise smiled sadly. "And you deserve a husband who feels the same."

"But what should I do?" Lavinia stood abruptly and started pacing the floor. "It's not like I have a bevy of suitors lining up to take my hand. And even if they were, I wouldn't want them

to.” She looked at Annalise with such a naked plea in her eyes that her heart squeezed.

“All right, if you’re that sure that there can be no one else but Dane, then I shall help you,” she said and nodded resolutely.

“You will?”

“Yes, but there will be no talk of deals and loveless marriages. If we are to make Dane your husband, we are to make him fall in love with you.” Lavinia gave a snort. “No, none of that. You are beautiful and bright and exuberant, and only a fool wouldn’t fall in love with you.”

“Then every man in the country is a fool.”

“Quite possibly.” Annalise grinned at her friend. “But Kensington is no fool. He’s just so used to thinking of you as his little sister that he doesn’t see you as his prospective wife. What we need to do is to make him aware of you in another light. And I just know how we can do that.”

“You do? How?”

Annalise stood and walked toward Lavinia, studying her from head to toe. A debutante’s light colors didn’t flatter Lavinia’s complexion. She was pale with light brown hair, and she seemed to blend in with the light clothing. She was also round and curvy, and all the ruffles just made her look so much bigger.

“First thing we need to do is order you the most fetching gown,” Annalise said. “In fact, Caroline is taking Olivia to her modiste on the morrow. We should join them.”

“She is? How come? I thought Olivia despised fashionable clothing and had her special modiste.”

“Well, yes. But she revealed she is ready to change her mind. Apparently, she fancies a gentleman and wants to catch his eye.”

“Who?” Lavinia’s mouth dropped open.

“I do not know. She didn’t tell us. But this would be a good first step for you, too. In order for Kensington to start seeing you as a woman, you need to dress and act like a woman around him. We’ll start with the ball. I shall trick Kensington into dancing with you, and we’ll keep throwing the two of you together during all the other social events. I am sure he won’t be able to resist your feminine charms.”

Lavinia grimaced in uncertainty. “I don’t think I have any charms.”

Annalise smiled. “Trust me, you do.”

Blake had been in a dark mood ever since Annalise had returned his signet ring. It carried all the memories with it, both before his disappearance and after. His foul mood followed him for a few days, and he hadn't been the most attentive of husbands because of it. He needed to change that. He'd promised to court her again, and he needed to do just that.

While Annalise was entertaining visitors, he sprigged the carriage and went to the florist. He spent an extravagant sum on Annalise's surprise and settled against the carriage seats with a happy grin on his face. Annalise wouldn't be free from her obligations yet, so there was no hurry to return. Instead, he decided to follow up on one of his leads regarding his disappearance.

A few moments later, he was admitted into a spacious drawing room, filled with pink and orange furniture and wallpaper. He scoffed, looking around. Was he even in the right place?

"Don't scoff at my mother's decorations," the duke said in a gravelly voice from behind him. "She loved this room."

Blake whirled around and stared right into the frosty gray eyes of the Duke of Kensington. "I didn't hear you come in," he said, eyeing the man curiously.

"You were too absorbed with your surroundings, I believe." Kensington indicated the wallpaper, and Blake just raised a brow. "Would you like some tea? Biscuits perhaps? I hear my cook bakes the most splendid biscuits, although I've never tried one, and they always go to waste."

"A pity," Blake said dryly. "However, this is not a social call."

"How peculiar." Kensington frowned but indicated a couple of chairs by the window. They settled into too-small chairs on either side of a tiny decorative table, looking like a couple of giants. Blake squirmed uncomfortably, but the duke sat still, watching him like a predator, waiting for his prey.

"Let's get right to business then," the duke said calmly. "What brings you here if not social niceties?"

This was it. He needed to be very careful to get the truth out of the cunning duke. Blake was certain Kensington was not about to spill the beans regarding his involvement with either Annalise or his capture. How he approached this could cost him the truth.

"Well, first off, I'd like to offer my sympathies since you've lost a duchess to your dukedom." Blake watched Kensington for any reaction, but the man just looked at him, his

eyes hard. "It must have been difficult, planning everything for so long and then to have it all fall apart just before the betrothal announcement could be made."

"The betrothal announcement had been made. Just a moment before you sauntered into the ballroom," Kensington said dryly. "Nevertheless, it was no hardship, really. As long as Annalise is happy, no harm was done."

"Lady Payne," Blake gritted through his teeth.

Something about the duke's choice of words didn't sit right with Blake. Did Kensington know how unhappy Annalise had been in their marriage prior to Blake's disappearance? Had she confided in him? The thought sent a wave of rage through his body, but he kept himself under control.

"When did you propose to her?" he asked instead.

The duke raised his brow. "Didn't she tell you? Or have you not discussed that part?"

"We didn't do a lot of... talking." Blake deliberately made it sound like an innuendo. There was no way he was admitting his true state of marriage to a pompous duke.

"Ah," was all he said.

"So? When was it?"

Kensington eyed him curiously. "And why do you want to know?"

"Why won't you answer me?" Blake raised his eyebrow in return.

The duke let out a short sniff. "About a sennight after your disappearance."

Blake had not expected that answer. In fact, he wasn't sure what he was hoping to hear, but whatever it was, it was not this. "A sennight?" he repeated, outraged. "Seven bloody days?"

"I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish with these questions, Payne. More to the point, why you won't ask your wife? They are innocuous enough." He narrowed his eyes for a moment and then sat back. "Unless you are not speaking to one another. Now that would be curious, wouldn't it? It would explain your jealousy." He smoothed his cravat and looked out the window, seemingly bored.

"My marriage with Annalise is none of your business. Your hasty proposal, however, makes you a prime suspect in my disappearance."

The duke let out a hoarse laugh. Not a joyous one. It was bitter and angry.

"How dare you?" Kensington finally gritted out.

"How dare I?"

"Yes, Annalise was—"

"It's Lady Payne to you!" Blake's fist came down on the table with a loud thump.

Kensington observed him dispassionately, then frowned. "You don't know, do you?"

"I don't know what?" Blake asked irritably.

"The reason—the main reason I proposed."

"If I knew, would I be here?" Blake breathed heavily, fisting his hands, forcing them to stay at his sides.

The duke eyed him silently for a moment. "Annalise," he finally said, "was beside herself with worry, not only because of your disappearance but because you left her nothing. Your heir had managed to scrounge up a small stipend for her and kept her under his roof, but she didn't want to exploit his generosity."

"Exploit?" Blake shot up in rage. "She is a countess!" His rage wasn't aimed at the duke, however. He was angry at himself.

"*Was* a countess," Kensington said in a quiet but hard tone. "The moment you disappeared, she was a penniless widow with no home of her own, no capital, no one to look out for her. And I, as her family friend, took it upon myself to make it *my* responsibility to her family, to *you*, to look after your wife." There was a long pause. "Anything else, you'll have to ask your wife. But don't you dare accuse me of such a thing again."

Blake was seething with anger. His face was hot, his breathing erratic. He closed his eyes to keep himself under control. The worst part of this conversation had been the fact that the duke was right. When gentlemen inherited the title, the first thing they did was put their affairs in order, draft out their wills.

But his father had died suddenly and unexpectedly less than a fortnight after Blake's wedding, having prepared Blake for nothing. Not that Blake had any interest in upholding his responsibilities. He was having too much fun drinking, wagering, and meandering around. He kept his meetings with stewards to just remind them to do things as they've always done. And as for Annalise—

Blake opened his eyes and looked Kensington squarely in the eyes. The duke wasn't one to hide his gaze. His face was impassive, his breathing even; he didn't fidget or move; he just sat there, still like a statue.

"I suppose I owe you my apology," Blake forced out finally. "And my gratitude."

"I want neither of those things." Kensington's voice was hard. "Just make sure to put your affairs in order before you disappear..." He paused. "Again."

Blake cast a curious eye the duke's way. His warning sounded almost like a threat. But perhaps it was just the way the aristocrat spoke.



Blake nodded and was about to leave before turning back to the duke. “So that was it then? That was the main reason you married Annalise? You didn’t need a wife; you just wanted to protect her?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So you do need a wife?”

Kensington let out a breath as if his patience were waning. “I’m a peer, Payne. And I, unlike you, take my duties seriously.”

Blake didn’t bother responding to that. He whirled on his heel and stalked out of the room. Remaining with the righteous and oh-so-proper duke another moment would make him gag.

\* \* \*

Annalise walked into her bedroom after Lavinia left and stopped short at the sight.

Every surface in her room was filled with bouquets of dark red roses. Annalise slowly entered farther into the room and fingered the petals of the rose closest to her. She noticed that there were notes on each of the bouquets and started picking them up and reading them. Every note contained just one word, an adjective: *beautiful*, *astonishing*, *wonderful*, *brilliant*, *delightful*, and other outrageous compliments. Annalise felt her eyes tear up and her cheeks burn. This reminded her of how Blake used to court her. Relentlessly, unashamedly, extravagantly. She turned as she heard a light knock and saw Blake enter her room.

“I hope you like them,” he said in a low voice.

Annalise blinked to keep her tears at bay. “They’re beautiful,” she whispered.

“I am glad. Would you mind joining me for a short stroll about the gardens?”

He was so formal, although mischief sparkled in his eyes. Annalise couldn’t help but smile in response. Caught up in her reminiscence and by this unexpected gesture, she couldn’t refuse. So she walked toward him and put her hand on his sleeve.

“Lead the way.”

\* \* \*

Blake walked through the garden path with his wife on his arm. There was a time he hadn't thought he would ever feel this peaceful again. Her quiet breaths, her warmth at his side, and her scent were incredibly soothing. He felt all his worries melting away. They hadn't spoken since the moment they exited her room. She probably didn't want to ruin the idyllic atmosphere, either. They'd both been through a lot in the past year and a half. They both deserved one quiet evening.

Only he didn't want just one evening. He wanted the rest of his life to be full of these moments spent in blissful contentment. Or perhaps even happiness.

"Tell me," he said and cleared his throat. "How did you spend your day?"

She flicked her eyes at him briefly before returning her gaze ahead. "I spent most of the day with Lavinia. You remember Lavinia, don't you?" He nodded, although he really didn't. "We were discussing what she'll wear to the ball. She needs a new gown, so we shall go to a fitting tomorrow."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Annalise raised a brow. "You want to join four ladies on an outing to a modiste?"

*Four?* Blake feigned nonchalance. "Why not?"

Annalise's eyes twinkled. "Listening to our chatter about fabrics, waiting for hours while we try things on?"

"I would enjoy just being around you," he said, and Annalise's eyes softened.

"Then perhaps we can schedule another outing to a modiste just the two of us."

Blake blinked. He was certain she didn't mean it as innuendo, but visions of Annalise in revealing sensual undergarments paraded in front of his eyes. "I would love that very much."

Annalise smiled. "I don't want to make my unmarried friends uncomfortable by having you with us."

Blake nodded. "It's a ladies' outing, I understand."

"Oh, before I forget, I promised to chaperone Lavinia to Caroline's ball. She has no one to go with."

This news didn't sit well with Blake, but he nodded. As much as he disliked the idea of sharing his carriage with another woman when he could've been alone with his wife, he imagined refusing would be even worse.

"Are you going to order a gown for yourself too?"

"I don't need one; I have plenty." She waved the matter away.

"Do you? It wouldn't hurt to have another. I can't imagine you've procured a new

wardrobe since my disappearance.”

“Oh, I’ve had dozens of new gowns made recently for my—” She stopped abruptly and looked away. Blake looked at her in curiosity. “For my trousseau,” she finished lamely, and suddenly he wished he hadn’t asked.

The pain of being replaced so quickly and so easily settled deep in his chest. He made an effort to nudge it aside.

“Are you looking forward to the ball then?” he asked, to change the subject.

“Not really. Half of London’s high society will be in attendance, and everybody is going to be watching us and trying to interpret our every glance, every gesture.” She heaved a sigh. “I don’t enjoy being on display, but it is necessary to get through it sooner rather than later. After that, it will be easier.”

“Will it?” The words escaped his mouth before he had time to think about them. He wasn’t sure what he meant by the question, but he wasn’t talking about appearing in front of the aristocrats.

Annalise swallowed. “We shall have to behave like a happy, reunited couple.”

Blake stopped and turned to look at her. “And we aren’t?”

“Blake...” She looked away for a moment, biting her lip.

He took her hands in his and ran his thumbs over her palms. She still didn’t look at him.

“Annalise, are you truly that unhappy I am back?”

She looked at him then, her eyes large and vulnerable. “Of course, I am happy. Blake, when you disappeared I... I regretted a lot of the things we said, and I wished a million times that everything was different—”

“It could be—”

“—but it isn’t,” they said at the same time. “You’ve changed. A lot. And I can see that.” She chewed on her lips nervously before continuing. “But not where it matters.”

Blake stood stricken. He didn’t know what to say to that. His mind went blank, and it felt as if a dagger was struck through his heart. He cleared his throat and turned back to the path. “I shall change your mind,” he finally said.

# The Wedding Night



*Summer 1739*

Blake stood in his dressing room while his valet tied his cravat in elaborate knots. Blake didn't care what his cravat looked like most days, but this was his wedding day, so he could withstand a little torture from his valet as long as he looked presentable for his bride.

His father entered then, all big and powerful, shrinking the space in Blake's dressing room. He turned to the valet. "You can go now," he said and waited for the servant to leave. "Good," he said with a nod, still eyeing Blake. "You look good. Now, let's go to your sitting chamber so we might speak more comfortably."

Blake followed his father and sat across from him. His father lit a cigar, which he took out of his breast pocket, took a drag, and eyed Blake from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"You did well so far," he said. "You finished your education, you traveled the continent, you sowed your wild oats, and it's a good time you decided to marry. Good," he repeated with a nod. "Now, you need to learn something about marriage."

"What's that?" Blake sat back in his chair in a deceptively relaxed pose, although he was seething on the inside. The last thing he wanted was another lecture from his father. But he would listen like he always did, and he would follow his advice, too, just like he always did. Always a dutiful son.

"The wife is not like a mistress. Oh, no." His father shook his head again, puffing on his cigar. "The mistress is made for pleasure, while the wife is made for duty."

Bedding Annalise seemed anything but a duty to Blake, but he didn't say anything aloud.

"The wife's main purpose is to beget as many heirs as she can. It is an uncomfortable duty, painful." He grimaced in distaste. "That is why you ought to prepare her for it."

"Prepare her? How?" Blake's scowl deepened.

"No cuddling her. No gentleness. No prolonged lovemaking, and under no circumstances do you pleasure her."

Blake raised his brows. For one thing, it was unseemly to discuss such things with one's

father, but on the other hand, he wanted to ask why. He reveled in the idea of pleasuring his wife, kissing her long and leisurely.

“She’ll become too soft, and she won’t be able to birth you healthy sons,” his father said as if hearing his thoughts. This seemed like nonsense, the kind of which Blake had never heard. “Mark my words, son. You rut on her as many times as you can, as often as you can, and as fast as you can. That way, there’ll be more chance of you begetting sons. After you were born, I had gotten soft with your mother, and look where it got her.”

*Dead.* Blake’s mother died birthing her second son, and the babe had followed, dying a few days later.

“If I’d been rougher with her, she’d have been able to withstand childbirth the second time. I know you think you want to be gentle with her, to experience pleasure in the marital bed, but let me save you some time. Mistresses are for pleasure; wives are for duty. Your bride won’t be responsive to you in bed anyway, so you may as well not even start trying. And if you don’t believe me, you just wait and see on your wedding night. Your bride will know nothing of how to pleasure you. She will be skittish and frightened. Ladies are not bred for prolonged, tender lovemaking. They are stiff as a board and unpleasant to lie with. She will act disgusted the moment you come to her bed. Mark my words.”

Blake shook his head in disbelief. He didn’t think what the old earl was telling him held any merit, but it planted some seed in his head. He had no idea where that seed would lead him.

After the wedding ceremony was over, he went with his father and friends to a tavern, then to clubs, then to a place that looked like a whorehouse. As the rutting and the debauchery began in earnest, someone shoved Blake into a carriage and conveyed him home.

Blake was grateful to that someone, whoever that was. He thought it might have been Jarvis, but there was no way he would ever remember.

When he got home, disheveled and debauched, his innocent wife had already been sleeping in her bed.

He stalked toward her, leaving his clothes discarded in his wake. Blake climbed into bed with her, and only then did she awaken.

Annalise looked at him, and a slight smile appeared on her lips. “You’re back,” she said with a pleased smile and put her arms around him.

Blake grunted an answer and rolled on top of her. He kissed her on the mouth, and Annalise squirmed beneath him.

"What?" he asked hoarsely, and Annalise averted her face.

"You smell of spirits, cigars, and God knows what else!" she said indignantly.

"So what?" he asked in a slurred voice.

"Well, it's not pleasant," she answered crisply.

"Well, dear wife. It's not going to be pleasant. Neither is begetting heirs, so you better get used to it."

"Get used to what?" Annalise's voice grew panicked.

*Your bride will know nothing of how to pleasure you. She will be skittish and frightened.* His father's voice rang in Blake's drunken head, making him more irritable than he was.

"Spread your legs," he said hoarsely while raising Annalise's shift.

"What?" Her gaze was running over his features, her hands clutching at her fabric.

Her frightened visage made Blake's heart soften.

Blake rolled off her lightly and propped himself on the elbow. "Darling," he slurred. "No need to be scared. It will hurt only a little, but I promise you, I want you so much, it will be over in a second."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Annalise whispered, tears gathering in the corner of her eyes.

Blake heaved a sigh. His father was right. She had no idea how to pleasure anybody. She was frightened and skittish. But even through his drunken haze, he couldn't force himself on her.

He leaned in and kissed her eyes one by one. Annalise hugged him closer to her, and he moved to kiss her ears, then her neck.

Annalise's chest was moving in an accelerated rhythm, her nipples straining against the thin fabric and making him harder than he already was. He kissed the tips of her breasts through her night shift, and she whimpered.

Blake suckled on her nipples through her shift, then slowly lifted it and whispered into her ear, "Spread your legs, darling. I can't wait any longer."

He placed his forehead against hers, took himself in hand, and guided his cock to her core.

"I don't know what to do," Annalise whispered, then wrapped her arms around his neck.

"It will be quick," Blake gritted between his teeth, spreading her thighs wider. "I promise."

Blake entered her in one swift motion. Annalise held on to him tightly, her breaths hitting him against his ear.

He didn't see her face. Perhaps it was twisted in fear, maybe disgust. She tensed in his arms and didn't truly relax until it was over. She lay under him, silently, enduring his drunken rutting. He was done in a few short minutes and fell asleep soon after. No soothing her fears, no cuddling or gentleness.

She was soft and innocent, while he acted like a beast.

## Chapter 8



Annalise chatted away with her friend as they set out for the ball the next evening. In the dimly lit carriage, Blake could not take his eyes off his wife. Her inner glow spread through her entire being. She was beautiful. She had a lovely face, an exquisite figure, true. But her real beauty shone from within.

Her kindness, gentleness, and exuberant spirit could all be seen sparkling in her eyes.

Blake's gaze drifted from her face down to her body. She wore a deep ruby gown with a golden frill at the bodice and the edge of the skirts. Clear gems decorate the bodice, which was so low it couldn't help but draw the eye.

Blake swallowed loudly as he continued studying his wife's form. She didn't seem to notice his regard. She was discussing something animatedly with Lady Lavinia, who apparently had been her childhood friend. Blake had not remembered seeing the lady before this night, but evidently, they'd met on numerous occasions.

What else had he missed in the past?

No wonder Annalise was cold and distant with him now. He had been selfish in the past, too absorbed with his own issues, acting like a careless youth. Annalise had not been more than an accessory to him at the time. He was used to conquering, pursuing to win. But once he got her, he had no clue of what to do with her next.

After the disaster of the wedding night, Blake wondered how he expected her to ever forgive him.

But he vowed to change everything as it stood between them. He had learned to value his life and precious moments in that life. And no moment was precious to him without Annalise by his side.

When the carriage stopped, Blake jumped out and helped the ladies out of the vehicle. He lingered slightly as he held his wife. He'd missed her warmth and her scent, and he didn't think he'd ever get tired of holding her close to him. She lifted her questioning gaze to him. Blake winked and slowly let her go. He'd have a lifetime of holding her now.



The wait to get to the ballroom was long, the crowd at the ball too dense, and Blake felt himself bristling with impatience.

Annalise was right. Everybody was staring at them. Every single person passing by or simply in his line of vision made it their duty to stare at them like they were curiosities at the local fair.

Blake turned to his wife just to find her still chatting to her friend, seemingly unaware of the attention they were drawing to themselves. He lowered his head to hers and whispered in her ear. "Didn't you say we should pretend to be blissfully in love tonight at the ball?"

He saw with satisfaction that her skin was covered in goosebumps at the sound of his voice.

She turned a gentle smile to him. "I am to chaperone Lavinia tonight. I can't be making adoring eyes at you with my charge at my side."

"Too bad. I would have enjoyed it immensely. Am I allowed to make adoring eyes at you while you talk to your charge?"

Annalise's cheeks turned red as she gave him a reproving glance. Not an adoring expression, but it would do for now.

They finally made their way to the host, exchanged pleasantries with him and his niece, and moved along.

Blake looked around the throng of people. He saw Jarvis in a circle of his gentlemen friends. The same friends they'd been with at the gambling hell the night of his disappearance. Blake scanned the men with his gaze. There was Mr. Greyson St. John, Jarvis's cousin, and the new Earl of Bradshaw, formerly Lord Boyle. Perhaps they should be on his list of suspects, too. Only Blake barely crossed paths with them, aside from their drunken debaucheries, and he could think of no reason they would want him dead.

Not that there was a reason Jarvis would want him gone, either.

Blake called him one of his best friends, but come to think of it, he knew nothing about him. Other than he enjoyed high-risk stakes when he gambled, and he was there for Blake when he needed him. Blake didn't know what Jarvis did during the day or what his financial situation was or anything, really, and he had never been curious. Until the night he'd been captured on the way to Jarvis's carriage, that was. Now Jarvis had all of his attention.

When Blake had met Jarvis earlier this week in the park, the sun was behind his head, shadowing his features. That way, he looked exactly like the man from his nightmare. Perhaps the dream had been triggered by his suspicions. Blake shook his head. How was he to

discover the truth if he couldn't differentiate between dream and reality?

"Oh, look, there he is!" Annalise announced excitedly.

Both she and her friend turned to stare at some point in the room. Blake followed their gaze and watched the Duke of Kensington enter the ballroom. Blood boiled inside his veins. Didn't Annalise think he'd heard her? Couldn't she at least hide her interest in her former fiancé?

"I'll go to him as soon as I can," she said to Lady Lavinia, and Blake was ready to explode on the spot.

*She'll go to him as soon as she can?* What did she plan, a tryst to soothe his bruised heart? Right under her husband's nose! Blake tempered his anger and turned to his wife.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked.

She was still looking out into the crowd when she answered, "I can't dance just now. Not when I am chaperoning Lavinia. Perhaps you'd like to dance with her instead?"

Now she wanted to get rid of him. *Not a chance.* "No, my dear," he said silkily. "My arms are open only for you."

She looked at him then, and he couldn't hide the dark satisfaction on his face. Finally, she was able to drag her eyes away from her beloved Kensington.

"I'd rather you dance," she said with a slight frown. "That's why we are here. And there are far too many wallflowers during the balls due to bullheaded gentlemen like yourself."

Blake raised his brows. He'd never thought about it this way. In fact, he had never given much thought to any lady who happened to spend the night on the sidelines. For him, to dance with a lady meant that he was expressing his interest in her. He didn't see the point of dancing for any other reason.

While he was courting Annalise, he had never danced with anyone but her. And he had always regarded it as a token of his affection, as a show of his loyalty to her and only to her. Which was a laughable statement, really, considering his behavior after their marriage. Blake grimaced, feeling a headache coming on. All of those bitter memories, the unpleasant realizations, and the feelings of guilt were gnawing at him, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Oh, no," Lady Lavinia said softly by his wife's side. "He's dancing with Caroline."

Blake looked at the dance floor, and sure enough, Kensington had claimed the first dance of the host's niece. Blake cocked his head and looked at the couple. They moved gracefully, effortlessly among the other dancers, gliding along the floor as if alone in the world and not in a crowded ballroom. They looked as though they were made for each other so perfectly

they moved together. But stony expressions on their faces spoke another truth. The couple hadn't even spoken a word to each other since the beginning of the dance.

"She's the host's niece. I am sure he is just being polite," his wife said, not sounding convincing. Was she jealous? The thought made him scowl.

"Perhaps, ladies, you would like something to drink?" he asked cordially. Anything to stop himself from going over to the dancefloor and punching the duke in the face.

"Yes, thank you," his wife replied with a smile, and he ventured in the direction of the refreshments room.

Blake regretted his decision the moment he stepped away from his wife. He was stopped every moment by one person or another. Everyone seemed intrigued by his disappearance, declaring their deepest regrets for his unfortunate circumstances and proclaiming their delight in having him back on English shores.

He wasn't interested in telling anyone the truth, so he had to weave his way out of every conversation, trying not to offend anyone at the same time.

What seemed like an eternity later, he got the punches and made his way back to the ballroom. What he saw made his blood run cold. His wife was beautifully blushing as she spoke to her former betrothed. Blake tried to control his anger, but he couldn't. It was too much. Being ignored by her was one thing, but flirting with the man she almost married right in front of Blake's nose was not something he would tolerate.

Blake handed the punches to a passing footman and stalked his way to his wife. She was animatedly discussing something with Kensington, but the moment she spotted Blake, her expression turned somber.

"And what could the two of you be discussing, pray tell?" Blake asked in a menacing voice as he reached their sides.

"Good evening, Payne," Kensington answered, unperturbed. "Feeling better, I presume?"

"Yes, much," he answered, his eyes still on his wife. "So, what were you talking about before I got here?" he repeated.

"Dancing, actually," she said evenly.

"Dancing?" So she ignored Blake's advances, and the moment he turned his back, sauntered off to beg a dance from her beloved duke!

"Yes, my lord," she replied calmly. He hated it when she called him that.

"Well, perhaps we should stop talking about it and simply dance," Blake said and extended his arm.

Annalise threw an uncertain gaze toward Kensington, and Blake almost exploded from suppressed rage. Kensington inclined his head, and Annalise put her hand on Blake's arm.

They walked to the dancefloor in silence as Blake tried to rein in his emotions. He didn't want to make a scandal in front of everyone, and he did not quite trust himself to speak after the incident he had just witnessed. When they got to the middle of the dancefloor, the music started, and he turned toward his wife.

"I do not need permission from the duke to dance with my wife," he said as they started moving with the music.

"Pardon me?" Annalise threw him a confused gaze.

"Forgiven," he said with a smirk.

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I am talking about how you wouldn't leave His Grace's side to dance with your own husband."

"But I did leave his side," Annalise protested.

"I don't want you socializing with him anymore," Blake said.

Annalise turned her wide eyes toward him. "What are you saying? You are forbidding me to talk to my friend?"

"He is not your friend."

"How would you even know who is or is not my friend? You didn't even recognize Lavinia," Annalise said. It was true, but Blake was not about to concede his point.

"I am your husband, and I have every right to dictate who may or may not socialize with my wife. Especially if it comes to my wife's former betrothed."

Annalise scoffed. "You didn't much care about who I socialized with before. Why start now?"

They circled other dancers, and people smiled at them politely. Blake smiled and made his expression as pleasant as possible. "Why do you always have to bring up the past? Can't we move on from that?"

"And you being jealous of Kensington is not bringing up the past?"

"It's different. You were betrothed as recently as sennight ago."

"And I thought you dead as recently as sennight ago," Annalise said heatedly before composing her features for the benefit of the observing crowd. "You can't expect me to move on from the past when the past is just seven days old." Blake whirled Annalise among the crowd before they resumed their place in the circle. "You said you would try to win me back,

but so far, you haven't done anything to make me think you've changed."

"Haven't I?"

"You don't confide in me, you restrict my movements, and you order me about, expecting me to comply immediately. I shall not do that anymore, Blake." Annalise stopped on the dancefloor, but Blake picked her up and whirled her around.

"Keep dancing," he hissed between his teeth.

Annalise resumed dancing begrudgingly, and Blake heard the snickers from the crowd. Annalise laughed for the benefit of the surrounding people, and Blake felt cold inside.

"You can't expect me to fix our marriage in just seven days," he said.

"No, but I expect you to at least try."

Blake didn't answer, and they continued the dance in silence after that.

\* \* \*

Annalise couldn't help but feel a frisson of pleasure from being in Blake's arms again. The tender touch of his hand, the feel of his heat, and the tantalizing scent of his cologne.

Her body was a fool to be so easily lulled into false contentment by just being near a man who had hurt her like nobody else ever had. She averted her gaze and held herself as far away from him as the dance allowed.

Annalise noticed Olivia standing awkwardly by the wall. She looked beautiful in her new gown, but it was too revealing, and Olivia felt uncomfortable. Instead of shining in it, she hid in the shadows. How the modiste had managed to prepare two gowns so fast was a mystery to Annalise.

They turned in the dance, and she saw Lavinia dancing with Kensington. Annalise couldn't help but smile. She'd had to use quite a bit of her wiles to make Kensington ask Lavinia to dance without making it seem like she was the one orchestrating it. It had to look like it was his idea. Otherwise, he would just feel pressured and wouldn't think about asking Lavinia to dance again. She'd feel like a chore, and this was the last thing they needed. It seemed to have worked, too.

She'd worried about facing Kensington after everything that had happened, but the first thing he had asked when she talked to him was about her wellbeing. He was a good man, a reliable man, someone who would dote on his wife. She wished nothing less for her friend.

Both Lavinia and Kensington deserved love in their lives.

Lavinia's eyes were glowing with happiness as she smiled up into Kensington's eyes. The moment the dance was over, he escorted Lavinia to the sideline, and Annalise saw her friend fan herself vigorously.

"You keep watching him; it's unseemly," her husband said.

"Pardon?" Annalise frowned up at him.

"Kensington, you keep watching him."

Annalise didn't know whether to laugh or cry. His jealousy was so out of place. Of course, he had no idea that it was Lavinia who she'd been watching, and she found no reason to correct him. Let him suffer. It wasn't as if he'd been so innocent.

At that moment, the Marquess of Roth, Caroline's uncle, stepped into the circle and demanded everybody's attention. Annalise wondered what kind of announcement the man wanted to make. Tonight's ball was extravagant, and it was clear that he had spared no expense. Did he plan for it to be special from the start?

"Dear Ladies and Gentlemen," the marquess said loudly. "It is with great pleasure that I make this announcement." He smiled almost wolfishly. "My dear niece has finally conceded to a proposal of marriage, and I couldn't be happier."

Annalise's mouth dropped open. Caroline had agreed to a match? Why hadn't she told her anything?

An unpleasant feeling settled deep in her belly.

"This match—and I wouldn't be exaggerating when I call it the match of the century—" the marquess continued.

"No, no, no, no..." Annalise muttered to herself as she searched Caroline with her eyes.

"—is a betrothal between my niece Lady Caroline and the Duke of Kensington."

At this moment, Annalise finally found Caroline standing next to the duke at the edge of the crowd. Her face was pale but resolute, her spine straight, her head held high. Next to her stood her betrothed, with a similar mask of quiet detachment on his face.

The astonished whispers and shocked gasps filled the ballroom, followed by exclamations of surprise. A few heads turned Annalise's way, but she didn't care about any of it.

Her panicked gaze settled on Lavinia's stricken face. Their eyes met, and Annalise saw all the anguish, horror, and despair in her friend's eyes. Lavinia turned and hurried away from the crowd. Annalise started to do the same, but a strong hand caught her arm in a tight grip.

"Don't even think about it," Blake gritted between his teeth.

She turned to him, her eyes wide. His face was dark with anger or even rage, his chin set at a hard angle, and his eyes were icy. As much as Annalise didn't like to think of herself as a coward, she felt unaccountably intimidated by her husband at that moment. He was like a complete stranger; no, like a strange animal or even a monster.

"I-I..." she began to stutter, but he cut her off.

"You will stand here, wife," he said in the same menacing, low voice. "And you will smile and pretend that nothing is bothering you."

Annalise's breath was coming in shallow gulps. She wished to twist her arm away from his grip and give him a piece of her mind. But he was right. She'd only make a spectacle of herself and him in front of the beau monde, and it was not worth it. Everybody would think exactly what Blake was thinking. That she had feelings for Kensington and was hurt by his hasty betrothal. So she put a smile on her face while she surveyed the crowd for any sign of Lavinia.

Poor dear Lavinia. She'd been so happy just a moment ago, dancing in Kensington's arms, and now... All her dreams had been shattered in an instant.

## Chapter 9



As the music started and the betrothed couple led the dance, Annalise steered her husband out of the ballroom. Blake was fairly bristling in indignation. He was outwardly calm and smiling at the passing ladies and gentlemen, but she could feel his arm vibrating beneath her fingers, his muscles bunching from strain.

The minute they left the ballroom, Annalise looked around the hall, trying to gauge where Lavinia might have gone.

Blake rounded on her and took her by the arms. “I thought you said you don’t love him,” he barked.

Annalise’s attention snapped back to her husband. She disengaged from him, her eyes growing round. “Are you out of your mind?”

“I didn’t particularly think so, no,” he answered in all seriousness.

Annalise let out a nervous laugh. “You are so caught up in your suspicions and jealousy that you do not see past your own nose,” she said angrily and was glad to see him falter.

“I don’t see how that’s so far beyond the world of possibilities, especially considering your reactions just now.”

“My reaction was a worry for my friend. And if you’ve ever paid attention to me or the company I keep, you would have known it. Lavinia, not I, is the one who is in love with Kensington. She was the reason I was stricken by the news.”

“Oh,” he exclaimed, his righteous anger dying down. It only fanned the flames of her own rage. “Then why—”

“You must remember to never confuse us, *my dear husband*,” she spat the endearment. “It is you, not I, who repeatedly betrayed your spouse. You, not I, who had paramours and... and mistresses...”

“Annalise—” Blake made a step toward her, but she stepped back, shaking her head.

“Even when I thought you dead, I’ve never been unfaithful to you, unlike you, who—” She didn’t get to finish the sentence, for, at that moment, Blake reached her in two long strides,



seized her, and planted his lips on hers.

Annalise instinctively reached for him and grabbed onto his shoulders, lest she fall. He slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her as if he wanted to devour her. His hands roamed her body, and she gave in under his onslaught. With a sigh of surrender, she opened her mouth and welcomed his tongue as it entered her warmth. It felt so good to be touched again, kissed so hungrily. She missed being wanted, desired. She missed the comfort of his arms.

He felt different to her touch. His shoulders were much broader than when he'd disappeared a year and a half ago; his skin felt tighter and his body harder. His lips hadn't changed, though. They were as hard and demanding as they ever were. She moaned at the ticklish, sensual feeling of his tongue sweeping over her mouth as if he owned it. And perhaps at that moment, he did.

He groaned in satisfaction, and his mouth gentled instantly. One hand came up to cup her cheek. His hand was large and calloused, so different from the soft aristocratic hand she remembered. He ran his thumb over her skin in a light, gentle caress, and her mind went blank. His other hand smoothed its way down to her bottom and squeezed her, bringing her body closer to his. So close, in fact, that she could feel his erection pressed up against her stomach through all the layers of their clothing.

The door opened at that moment, and Annalise jumped back from her husband's arms. Blake steadied her with one hand and moved closer to shield her from the curious onlookers.

"Annalise," he finally said with a ragged sigh. "I have never been unfaithful to you either... At least not in the way you think I was."

Annalise sniffed while a sharp pain originated in the middle of her chest. She rubbed it in soothing circles, and Blake followed the movement. "But you will not believe me whatever I say." He took a deep breath. "I don't want to cause you more discomfort. I shouldn't have acted as I did just now... I apologize for my outburst, I just"—he raked his hand through his hair—"I don't know how to act around you anymore. I feel like I don't know anything about you. I feel like I don't know you."

*Well, now you know how I feel.*

"I promised you a new start, and I haven't delivered. But I shall. All I ask of you is to give me a fair chance. No past."

Annalise stared at her husband's open face. She had trusted that face two years ago, and it didn't bring her anything but pain and sorrow. She wouldn't survive going through that again. "I don't know if I can forget the past."

"Then maybe put it aside? Let us get to know each other now. I've changed, and I just want the chance for you to get to know me again."

Annalise nodded. "I... I need to check on Lavinia."

Blake gave a slight nod. "Do you want me to escort you?"

"No, but I shan't be long."

Annalise turned and walked away from her husband, her emotions in turmoil. What had just happened there? What was that kiss? And would she be able to resist him for much longer?

He'd given her two months, and now he was waging a battle against her weaknesses. There was a slight possibility that he had changed in the past year and a half, but she was yet to see it. If she gave in to his promises and kisses, she doubted she would be able to withstand another heartbreak. Annalise needed to keep her wits about her and never forget that he was the one who'd ruined her trust in the first place.

\* \* \*

Unrestrained and uncontrolled sobs shook Lavinia's body as she cried on Annalise's lap. Annalise ran her hand through her friend's hair; an inadequate gesture meant to soothe, to comfort. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't working. Annalise had found Lavinia in one of the closed rooms on the second floor, crying her eyes out. She couldn't imagine how Lavinia was feeling.

Annalise knew from her own experience what it was like to be completely in love with someone who then betrayed her. She knew what it was like to dream and to hope for a perfect future, to run on clouds, only to have those hopes dashed in a matter of minutes. However, it wasn't quite the same when somebody you've been secretly in love with all your life chose to marry somebody else. Twice.

"I was all right when he was marrying you," Lavinia said, between hiccups. "After all, I've loved you just as much and for the same length of time, if not more." She finally sat up and raised her gaze to Annalise, her eyes brimming with tears. "But Caroline? He's known her but a few years. I don't think I've ever seen them interacting together, have you?" Lavinia blew her nose into her handkerchief and wiped at her tears.

"Lavinia, dear, I hardly think this was a love match. I mean, Caroline didn't seem happy

about it either.”

“Then why did she agree to marry him? She has a multitude of suitors.”

Annalise frowned in thought. “That day, when you missed a nuncheon... Caroline mentioned that her uncle was getting insistent about pressuring her into marriage. I didn’t think much of it then, although I should have. As a marquess, I doubt he would insist upon a marriage that was beneath her station, and there are not many bachelor dukes walking around. I should’ve made a connection.”

“How could you have? I wouldn’t think Dane would choose another bride with such haste. What does he need a bride for? Heirs? I’ve heard him say on numerous occasions that he has brothers to carry out that particular responsibility, so he needn’t marry. And suddenly, two betrothals in a span of a sennight?”

Annalise bit on the inside of her cheek. Lavinia was right. Kensington had never been interested in taking a bride. When he proposed to her, it was out of duty to her as a family friend, but what about Caroline?

Something felt off there. Two betrothals in such a short period of time were bound to entice gossip. It bordered on scandal, which Kensington always hastened to avoid.

“I should have just gone to him and proposed the deal,” Lavinia said. “Then it would have been me standing up with him as his fiancée tonight.”

Annalise decided not to point out that tonight’s ball had been hosted by Caroline’s uncle, and that would’ve been unlikely. That wasn’t the point.

“I am sorry I dissuaded you from doing so,” she said instead.

“Or perhaps he would have refused, and I’d have been humiliated.” Lavinia let out a burst of nervous laughter and covered her face with her hands.

“Dear, you have to try and move on now that he’s betrothed.” Annalise tried to say this as softly as she could, but Lavinia’s head shot up, and her eyes were wide as saucers.

“But you said it yourself; Caroline doesn’t want him.”

“So?” Annalise frowned.

“Perhaps you could talk to her. And you could ask her not to marry Kensington. She can pick someone else, can’t she? Anyone else.”

Annalise’s heart filled with sorrow for her friend. “Dear—”

“No, please, Annalise. You are the one who said that he could look at me differently, that he could fall in love with me. If he doesn’t love Caroline and she doesn’t feel affection toward him, then I still have a chance. Please, please, help me.”

Annalise grimaced. Lavinia wasn't thinking clearly. Grief was clouding her judgment. How did she imagine Caroline's uncle would react to any of this? The betrothal being made so publicly would result in a grand scandal if dissolved.

However, Annalise knew Caroline well, too. If she had any idea how Lavinia felt, Caroline would never consent to marry the duke. Perhaps she'd even tell him to his face that he should look a little closer at his friend. Perhaps this insane idea could work and would solve both her friends' problems... Besides, she owed Lavinia to at least try.

Either way, she needed to speak to Caroline. Annalise was worried about the hasty betrothal, and she couldn't fathom how Caroline was feeling at the moment.

"Very well," she said. "I shall speak to her."

"You will?" Lavinia's eyes lit up with hope.

"I shall. But I do not promise anything."

Lavinia bit on her lip and nodded, visibly trying not to be too hopeful. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me yet."

"I thank you for always being there for me," Lavinia whispered and wiped at her cheeks.

"You do not need to thank me for that either. I love you."

Annalise handed Lavinia another handkerchief and patted her on the arm. "I need to get back to the ballroom. If I don't show myself soon, there'll be another set of gossip about Blake and me on the morrow."

"Right." Lavinia nodded. "Please, go. I shall stay here awhile."

"Do not stay long, darling. We don't need to stir more gossip. I shall send a maid to fetch you."

Annalise was halfway to the door when Lavinia called out her name. She paused and looked at her questioningly.

"I know you are hesitant about trusting Blake again," she said. "I know he's done some horrible things. But I also know that you love him. And perhaps you will decide to move away in two months' time but... All I know is if I were given two months to spend worry-free in blissful happiness with Kensington, if I was told he'd marry and I'd be miserable after, but I'd have the memories of these two months... I would take it."

# Chapter 10



Annalise woke up to a light rap on the door. She sat up and adjusted her nightcap, which had gone askew during the night.

“Come in,” she called and watched as Blake trailed into her room with a breakfast tray. She blinked at the surprising tableau.

Last night, they hadn’t talked after the incident in the hall, or at least they hadn’t talked alone. They had returned home, and Annalise retired immediately. But Lavinia’s words never left her mind. What if she was right? Should she try to enjoy the two months she had with Blake? Build the memories together and maybe, just maybe, leave this place with a babe in her belly? Warmth unfurled inside at the thought.

“Good morning.” Blake placed a tray on her lap.

It was filled with kippers, eggs, tomatoes, and other morning meal goodness. And a garden rose lay at the side.

Annalise raised a brow.

“Please, accept this meal as my apology,” Blake said with a smile.

“Apology?” Annalise picked up the rose and caressed her face with its petals.

“Yes. For acting like a complete arse at the ball. Jealous arse, might I add.”

Annalise pursed her lips to keep from laughing, the image of a jealous arse not leaving her mind. She picked up a fork and started chasing the food around the plate to avoid his gaze.

His behavior during the ball last night was disagreeable, true. However, if he started apologizing, there were far more grievous things he’d done in the past.

“I’ve been ill-tempered and acted unfairly toward you.” He paused. “However, I do not regret the kiss.”

Annalise froze with the fork halfway to her mouth. She didn’t regret it either. That kiss had kept her awake half the night. He’d stirred the feelings and desires within her that she’d rather keep hidden, but she couldn’t help but crave him.

He waited, watching her. As if hoping she would return the sentiment. Annalise popped

the fork into her mouth and chewed to keep herself from voicing aloud her desires.

After a brief pause, he continued. "I understand that this isn't the only thing I should apologize for. But we promised to set aside the past, didn't we?"

Annalise nodded. "Perhaps." She took a sip of chocolate and relaxed against the pillows. "Mm, it tastes like heaven."

"Good." Blake grinned at her.

"Would you care to join me?" Annalise raised a cup, and Blake's grin turned wolfish.

Instead of taking the cup in his hand, he leaned forward and sipped right from the cup while Annalise tried to hold it steady.

"No!" she yelped, laughing. "You'll spill it!"

Blake took the cup and placed it on the tray. "The tastiest chocolate I've ever had."

Annalise shook her head. "You are preposterous," she said with a light smile.

The devil was creeping back into her heart. She wasn't certain she was ready to allow it.

Blake tilted his head toward the tray. "Eat, darling."

Annalise smiled self-consciously. "Would you like some of this? I feel strange eating by myself."

"No, this is all for you. I noticed you haven't eaten much since my return. I'd like to change that if I can."

Annalise sputtered a laugh. "Is that why you insisted I join you for meals?"

"One of the reasons, yes." Blake grinned in return. "Listen," he said after a short pause. "I know I haven't been a perfect husband. The least agreeable, in fact. But I want to change that. To that end, if you need anything—wish for anything—just tell me. I shall be certain to make all your wishes come true."

"All my wishes?" One side of her mouth kicked up in a smile.

"Yes, your most fervent wishes."

Annalise blinked. She knew her fervent wishes. She wanted a family. A real one. The one she had never had but read about in her books. A family with an adoring husband and a few chubby babes. She lowered her eyes to her tray of food. "You'll have to work a little harder to get that. One breakfast and a pleasant conversation doesn't grant you access to my most fervent wishes."

"Then what does?" Blake's voice was low, his gaze concentrated on her face.

Annalise stared right back at him. "I do not know. Perhaps time?"

Blake swallowed and nodded. "Well, at least you think the conversation is pleasant. Which

is quite reassuring.” He smiled.

\* \* \*

Annalise sighed as she settled more comfortably against the plush seats of her carriage the same afternoon. She’d changed her attire soon after her husband left her room and ran off before he had a chance to detain her.

*Ran off* would be an appropriate term to describe her defection. After every one of their brief encounters, her entire body was abuzz. She needed time to resolve her feelings.

Besides, she had promised Lavinia she would talk to Caroline, and she was extremely curious to hear from Caroline how the betrothal had happened. A few moments later, her carriage halted. Annalise drew on her gloves and prepared to exit.

Lavinia’s tear-streaked face and Caroline’s stony expression when the betrothal was announced flashed before her eyes. The door to the carriage opened, and her footman helped her out.

Caroline’s butler opened the door as soon as Annalise climbed the steps to the front door, and he let her into the familiar parlor. Annalise was a frequent guest in this house and especially this parlor since the first time she’d met Caroline. She knew this place as if it was her own home.

Yet today, it felt different somehow. She looked around but couldn’t quite put her finger on what was wrong.

The door swung open, and Caroline burst into the room, her hair windblown and her face flushed. She never looked as disheveled as she did now. She was always composed, nary a hair out of place.

“Annalise, dear, I am so glad you are here,” she said and stretched her arms toward her.

“Good afternoon, dear.” Annalise smiled. “Is everything all right? You seem... winded.”

“You caught me in the middle of the great move.”

“The great move?”

“Yes, another one of my uncle’s peculiarities, I am afraid.” Caroline waved a dismissive hand and indicated for Annalise to sit. When they both were seated, she continued. “Ever since the betrothal agreement was signed, he’s been acting strange. Or rather stranger than before. He started instructing me on what I should take with me from the townhouse, writing

down things that would make up my trousseau. Can you believe it?"

Annalise looked around the room again, and then she realized what was different. All the paintings had been taken down.

"Why is that?" she asked, returning her gaze to Caroline's.

"I wish I knew." Caroline huffed an impatient breath. "He's been withdrawn lately, more than usual."

Annalise furrowed her brows. If things were this uncertain for Caroline, perhaps the betrothal would be a lot more difficult to dissolve than Annalise first thought. "Regarding the betrothal, I've been meaning to ask you—"

"Oh, I am sorry, dear." Caroline covered both Annalise's hands with hers. "I've been meaning to tell you, I promise. I just didn't think he'd actually go through with it! I mean, he's been talking about getting me married forever, but I never actually believed he would follow through on the threat. He usually forgot by morning."

"What do you mean?" Annalise frowned.

"Well, I told you, my uncle started talking about me needing protection and a powerful husband some weeks ago, but nothing came of it until a few days ago. After Payne returned—after your betrothal to Kensington fell through—I suppose, he saw a perfect opportunity. He reached out to the duke and arranged a betrothal agreement."

"He did it? Without your consent?"

Caroline grimaced. "I might have... Well, it could have been said that, in a way, I-I gave him my consent," she finished lamely and looked away.

"You did? But I thought you didn't want to marry?"

"I didn't—I don't! But he's been so worried, and I had to ease his mind."

"You agreed to marry a man—to shackle yourself to a person *forever*—because you wanted to ease your uncle's mind?"

"I know how it sounds, but as I said before, he usually forgot by morning." Caroline stood and started pacing. "We would spend the entire evening arguing about this, and the next day he would forget everything, the entire conversation. So instead of arguing with him, I started humoring him and agreeing to any betrothal he proposed. It made for quieter evenings, and since he never remembered, I did not see any harm in humoring my ailing uncle. But this time, he did remember. He came to me the next morning with the betrothal contract."

"So, are you going to marry Kensington?" Annalise asked softly.

Caroline halted in her tracks before making a swift turn. She walked back to the settee



and plopped next to Annalise.

“Do I have a choice?” she said with an uncertain face that was at odds with her usual self-assured demeanor.

“That’s actually what I came to talk to you about.” Annalise delicately cleared her throat, not quite sure how to breach the subject. Caroline looked at her expectantly. “I know you truly don’t want to marry him... But there’s someone who—”

The door busted open at that moment, and a red-faced, teary-eyed maid flew into the room. Both Annalise and Caroline turned their full attention to her.

“My lady! His lordship—oh, may God help us all!” she cried, and tears streamed down her face as she fell to her knees.

“What’s wrong?” Caroline stood slowly and walked toward the maid with measured steps. “Tell me, what’s wrong?” she commanded, and the maid seemed to pull herself together under the autocratic command of her mistress.

“He’s in his room,” she said through the tears. “Dead, my lady.”

Annalise’s eyes widened, and her mouth slacked open. Before she could react, Caroline was out of the door. Annalise scrambled to follow, but she lost her friend even before she exited the room.

Annalise didn’t know which way to go. Thankfully, the throng of servants rushing to the site helped her navigate through the house. She saw a crowd gather by the room, and she couldn’t quite get past them.

Caroline was nowhere to be seen. Was she with the dead body of her uncle? Was he even truly dead? Surely, Caroline shouldn’t be allowed to see him in this state if that was the case.

As if in response to her thoughts, one of the servants placed himself in front of Annalise, blocking her view. He was tall but thin, like a waif. She thought she recognized him as the late marquess’s valet.

“You shouldn’t be here, my lady,” he said. “Let me escort you back to the parlor.”

“But—”

He extended his hand, showing the way he wanted Annalise to follow, successfully cutting Annalise off.

Annalise dug in her heels. “Lady Caroline is in there. I am not leaving without her. She needs my comfort, she—”

“Please,” the servant said firmly. “Her Ladyship needs her time to grieve.”

It was uncanny for a servant to talk to Annalise this way. She tried to peek and see what

was going on behind his back, but he moved his body to block her view every time.

“Very well,” Annalise huffed irritably. “Tell Lady Caroline I’ll be waiting for her in the parlor.” With that, she spun on her heel and stalked away.

\* \* \*

Annalise must have walked the length of the parlor room twenty times while she waited for Caroline to show up. She looked at the strange room, with no paintings, and wondered what else the marquess had asked to take down. More importantly, why had he asked to have these things taken down at all? Perhaps they were of special value to him, or the most probable answer—the old marquess was slowly losing his mind and simply couldn’t account for his actions. She became even more resolute to save Caroline from the unwanted betrothal. Caroline couldn’t possibly marry someone her mad uncle had picked out for her.

After Annalise had done another lap around the room, the door finally opened, and she regarded Caroline’s pale features.

“I... apologize to have kept you waiting,” she said, and Annalise’s mouth dropped.

Had Caroline just apologized to her? Her mind surely must be jumbled. “Dear, you don’t have to apologize. I was worried for you.” Annalise stepped closer to Caroline in an attempt to hug her, but the latter evaded her touch.

“I beg your pardon, Annalise, I don’t feel like...” She paused, her hands extended in a gesture meant to keep Annalise away. “It was a suicide,” she finally said after a moment of silence, her voice devoid of any emotion. Annalise stared at her friend, horrified. “He left me a note explaining it all.” Caroline shook her head. Tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. “That’s why he insisted I marry. He wanted to make sure I was taken care of.”

“I know he meant well, but now that he is gone, surely you’re not still thinking of marrying Kensington?”

“I have to,” Caroline answered emphatically

“But why? You never—”

Caroline raised her hand. “Please, Annalise, not now.”

Annalise didn’t quite know what to say to that. She simply nodded. Perhaps Caroline needed some time to adjust to the idea that her uncle was gone. That, as much as she was devoted to him, she didn’t need to be now that he was gone. She could be true to herself.

Thankfully, Annalise was spared the need to say anything at all. The butler appeared at the door.

“His Grace, the Duke of Wolverstone,” he said loudly.

Annalise expelled a breath of relief. The duke was a long-time friend of Caroline’s family. He was extremely close with the marquess, and Caroline regarded Wolverstone like family. He’d know what to do; he’d give Caroline peace of mind.

Annalise dropped into a curtsy as the stately old duke entered the parlor. He gave a polite nod toward Annalise before walking resolutely to Caroline.

He hugged her tight to his chest, and Caroline sagged against him. The fatherly show of affection and Caroline’s reaction to it brought a tear to Annalise’s eye. She was glad that her friend was not alone. Caroline was with someone she trusted, someone who had been there her entire life. Someone who loved her like a daughter. Annalise’s own father wouldn’t fit the descriptors above. Men in her life had a tendency to let her down. And this made the entire scene even more emotional.

“Where is he?” the duke asked as Caroline disengaged from him.

“His rooms,” Caroline answered and wiped at her tears.

“I shall go see him then.” The duke’s voice was hoarse with emotion. “Lady Annalise.” The tears glistened in his eyes as he gave Annalise a nod. He slowly turned and left the room.

“Do you need anything?” Annalise asked as the door closed behind the duke.

Caroline just shook her head, her eyes glassy.

“Did you want something?” she suddenly asked as she looked up at Annalise. “You started saying something before—before all that.” She waved a hand toward the door and looked at Annalise expectantly.

Annalise chewed on the inside of her lip. Caroline wasn’t in the right mind to discuss her betrothal, and she, without a doubt, didn’t need Lavinia’s problems dumped on her. So Annalise pulled on a tight smile.

“It’s not important,” she said. “Do you want me to stay?”

“No.” Caroline shook her head and looked at the door. “I would rather be alone right now. But thank you for being here for me.”

Annalise nodded. “Call for me if you need anything at all.”

“I shall.”

Annalise passed her friend and turned at the door. Caroline was still standing in one place, staring at the walls, her gaze empty. Lavinia’s tear-streaked face appeared before

Annalise's eyes once again.

What a mess all this was. Both of her friends were hurting, and there was nothing she could do for either of them.

## Chapter 11



Annalise came home later that day and went straight to her room. She was tired and felt wrung out. It was exhausting to have to watch her friends suffer. What would she say to Lavinia? How would their lives go on after this? Would it pull her friends even farther apart?

She entered the room and stood against the door for a moment, gathering her strength. Annalise stepped farther into the room after a moment and saw a long object lying on her pillow. A case of some sort.

She frowned as she came closer, took it into her hands, and opened it. Inside lay a beautiful and large ruby necklace. So large, in fact, that when she picked it up, she could feel its weight substantially pulling her hand down.

Annalise placed the necklace back in its case and noticed that there was a note by its side.

*To my beautiful wife,* it read.

Annalise smiled softly, picked up the note, and placed it between the pages of her diary, where she kept all the other notes from him from when they were courting. Was she too easily swayed and naïve to feel this way about every little gesture of affection he'd shown her? She'd gone down that path before, and nothing good awaited her in the end.

A light rap on the adjoining door startled her. She looked up to see Blake standing in the doorway. He was in his breeches and shirtsleeves, his collar open, as if he'd tugged on it repeatedly, his hair flowing about his shoulders. She had never seen him without a wig before his disappearance. Now, she liked the view of his thick, dark hair and wanted to run her hands through it.

"How was your outing to Lady Caroline's?" he asked.

Annalise let out a sound somewhere between choked laughter and a snort. How did she answer a question like that? "It was... dreadful," she said with a grimace.

Blake's brows furrowed over his eyes as he walked into the room with purposeful strides. He came up to Annalise and grabbed her by the arms, firm yet gentle. He caressed her exposed skin with his thumbs, just where the gloves ended, and before the sleeves started, his

face marred with a slight frown.

“What’s wrong?” His voice was so gentle that Annalise almost burst into tears.

“Caroline’s uncle passed away today.”

“Pardon?”

Annalise looked away and bit her lip. “Yes, at the exact same moment I was there.”

Blake let out a harsh curse. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly and slowly drew her closer to him. He enveloped her in a warm embrace and ran his hands up and down her back in soothing motions.

Annalise tensed at the contact, but soon she let go of her defenses. With his warmth, his scent enveloping her, she truly could not resist his comfort. He wrapped his arms around her like a warm blanket. She leaned into him, burrowing her nose into his shirt, inhaling his scent. And everything was peaceful again. It felt right. She felt at home.

The thought startled Annalise so much she wriggled away. Blake was not safe. He was not her haven. And she shouldn’t ever feel like he was.

*But just once, her traitorous heart whispered to her. Give in to his comfort.*

Blake let her go instantly. He didn’t even try to hold her longer, to keep her with him, and that was for the best. Because if he had, she would have given in. He walked to the servants’ bell instead.

“I shall arrange for a warm bath to be prepared for you. You need to rest,” he said as he rang the bell.

Annalise gave a distracted nod, her mind still dazed.

Once the orders for the bath had been given, Blake came up to her and gently brushed a lock of her hair from her face. “Turn around,” he murmured.

As Annalise turned, he started slowly undoing the tiny mother-of-pearl buttons at the back of her gown. His breath, hot on her neck, sent pleasant shivers down her spine and a strange flutter inside her stomach. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the memories of this day coming back to her and bringing back the unpleasant weight in her chest.

“I can’t imagine how Caroline is feeling,” she said. “She tried to remain strong, but that’s how she is. She wouldn’t show her emotions in front of anybody. Even me.”

“Does she have anyone with her?”

“Her chaperone is living in the same house as her. But the Duke of Wolverstone also came right before I left. I imagine he was summoned. He was her uncle’s best friend and the closest person to a family she has left.”

Blake grunted. "Well, at least she's not alone."

Annalise swallowed. "I don't know how to tell Lavinia. Marrying Caroline to Kensington was the Marquess of Roth's last wish. Caroline is not going to back out of it now. And I am not going to dissuade her either."

"Perhaps the mourning will delay things, and she might still change her mind."

Annalise shrugged. "I don't know. Two of my friends are hurting right now, and I am powerless to do anything."

Annalise's bodice sagged as Blake finished with the buttons. He slowly took it off and placed it on the chair beside the bed. He started diligently working on the ties of her corset.

"We can't help Lady Caroline with grief, but we can offer her support, perhaps even help with the funeral arrangements."

*We.* The word warmed Annalise's heart. Ever since her wedding to Blake, she'd had to do everything alone. Redecorating the house, running the household, hosting dinners. He had never referred to them as a unit. She was by herself, and he was by himself. Perhaps he had changed. She wanted to believe that with all her heart. Especially now.

"As for Lady Lavinia," Blake continued as he stripped away the corset and started working on her overskirt. "I don't know if you're still in the mood for the theater, but I reserved a box for tomorrow. We can all go together. I already invited St. John and Townsend, so the company is going to be lively."

Annalise nodded absently. "I think the theater would be good to take our minds off things."

The door opened then, and maids came rushing in, the footmen behind them with the tub and buckets of steaming water. The maids arranged the area for the bath, preparing the towels while the bath was filled.

By the time all preparations were over, Annalise was stripped down to her chemise and stockings.

Blake turned to her and said, "I believe you can take care of the rest yourself."

"Or... you could stay," Annalise said impulsively and bit her lip. "I mean, I could use your help getting into the tub."

The truth was, being comforted by Blake, being in his arms again was exactly what she needed. She didn't want to be alone again with her gloomy thoughts. The tender care with which he helped her undress had pulled at the strings in her heart. She craved closeness with him. Perhaps it wasn't the smartest thing to rely on him again, but she needed it now. It was

all right to be weak at times, wasn't it?

Blake eyed the tall walls of the tub warily.

"That's not necessary. I apologize, I can ask Ruth to—"

"No," Blake replied instantly. "It's no bother. I shall help you."

Annalise nodded. "I just need to take off my stockings."

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and hitched the skirt of her chemise up so she could reach the garter. Blake's gaze burned on her skin like a fiery caress. Annalise raised her head, and he hastily looked away.

Annalise's cheeks burned as she finished stripping her stockings. She lowered her chemise and walked toward Blake. He instantly offered his arm and helped her step into the bathtub. The warm water felt so good on her tired muscles, enveloping her feet and calves. Blake glanced at her billowing chemise in the water, then raised a brow.

"Are you going to take a bath in the chemise?"

"No. I shall take it off as soon as you leave."

Blake made a couple of steps back. "What if I don't leave?"

Annalise's eyes rounded. Was he teasing? She hadn't thought this part through. She wanted him to stay, but she had never been completely naked around him. "I believe in that case I shall stand like this forever."

Blake let out a tiny laugh. "I'd like to see that." He gave a crooked smile before walking up to her with a serious expression on his face. "Come. Who is going to help you wash?"

"Ruth will." Annalise's heart beat an incessant staccato in her chest. The teasing, the banter. It all reminded her of the early courtship with Blake.

He theatrically looked around. "I don't see her anywhere. And the servants' bell is a few feet away from the bath. If you want to call her, you will have to step out of the bath yourself. Besides, why bother her when you have a husband by your side? Come. Put me to work."

Annalise lowered her eyes. He wanted to help her wash? Did husbands even do such things?

"I shall be your perfect maid, I promise," he coaxed. Annalise narrowed her eyes on him, and he smiled. "I shall do anything you ask of me. Just for today."

"For the entire day?" Annalise grinned, liking the picture of Blake doing her every bidding.

Blake nodded. "Use your power wisely, my lady." He winked and stretched out his arm.

She took it and slowly lowered herself into the bath, her chemise billowing in the water.



She pushed it down, and Blake smirked.

“You know you can take it off, right?”

“I know. I just don’t want to.”

“How are you going to clean all your… hidden parts?”

“That is none of your concern,” she said with a haughty air, and Blake laughed.

“Fair enough.” He took some soap and dipped it in the water.

He soaped his hands, moved closer to her, and started gently soaping her neck and shoulders. His hands tenderly glided down her arms. He took her hand and ran his thumb over her knuckles, studying it as if mesmerized.

“Blake?” Annalise raised a brow at him.

“Your skin is so soft,” he said in wonder as if speaking to himself. “I missed the feel of your skin.”

He smiled and winked at her before gently washing her wrist, her palm, between her fingers, tickling her skin and sending shivers up her arm. Goosebumps covered her skin, and his smile turned wolfish at the sight.

“When I was”—he cleared his throat—“away, I used to imagine your touch, your smile, the sound of your voice. I thought I remembered it quite vividly. But nothing comes even close to the real thing.” He gave a self-deprecating laugh and turned to wash her other hand.

Annalise studied her husband’s thoughtful features as he concentrated on washing her. “Will you tell me what happened to you?” she asked quietly.

Blake shook his head before she even finished her question.

“But you said you’d do anything I asked. So I am asking.”

“Anything but that, love. I promise you it is nothing that would affect our relationship. You know the most important part.”

“I know only that you were taken. Not why and how. I do not know what you’ve endured.”

“I-It is painful for me to remember,” Blake said, his voice hoarse.

“Please, let us not speak of the past.”

Annalise furrowed her brow. How was he expecting to build the future without talking about the past? Without resolving their past issues? She opened her mouth to say just that, but Blake raised a staying hand.

“Please? Let us concentrate on the present and the future. I don’t want the past to distract us from enjoying today. You’ve had a hard day as it is. Shouldn’t we at least try to have a

worry-free afternoon?"

Annalise pursed her lips. Perhaps an afternoon without worries, without the past hindering them, was exactly what they needed.

What Annalise needed.

She conceded, "All right. Just for today."

Blake grinned at her before shifting to the other side of the bath, across from her. "Lift your foot," he said, all seriousness.

"Pardon me?" Annalise clutched the chemise closer to her thighs in a valiant attempt at covering up.

Blake just raised a brow. "You do know that the fabric of your chemise is very translucent in the water. I can see everything I could wish for and more."

Annalise gasped in outrage and covered her body with her hands.

Blake laughed, then came back over to her and planted a kiss on her forehead. "It's all right, my innocent wife. You don't have to be embarrassed."

"Don't I?" Annalise breathed, staring into Blake's unfathomable, dark eyes.

Blake brushed a lock of hair back from her forehead, still gazing into her eyes. "I don't have to look at your naked form to be aroused by you. Simply being around you does that." He swallowed. His eyes darted lower, then back to her eye level. "I want to see you naked. All of you. But if you don't wish me to, I shall turn away."

Annalise's heart pounded so loudly in her chest that she thought it was about to burst. Being naked around Blake would be too intimate. An intimacy the level of which she had never experienced with him. With anybody. She wanted it more than anything. Perhaps today would be a perfect time because it would be on her terms.

He'd said he would do anything she asked of him. He wouldn't force himself on her, and he wouldn't act in any way she didn't wish. Perhaps now was the time to be a little daring.

Annalise put her hands on her chemise and slowly tugged it up. It was a struggle taking it off in the water, but she finally discarded the wet cloth by the bath. Blake hadn't moved, and Annalise expelled a breath of relief. She leaned forward, covering her most intimate parts.

Annalise swallowed, her heartbeat still frantic, her thoughts in turmoil. "Do you mind scrubbing my back?" Her voice came out in a higher pitch than usual.

Blake cleared his throat and moved slowly behind her. She couldn't see his face or his reaction to her brazen nakedness. She was too afraid to turn. But she could feel the tension in the air.

A moment later, his hot hands were on her as he carefully stroked her back with soap. The touch of his fingers on her skin left a burning sensation in their path. The glide of soapy water against her back made her sigh in pleasure.

He lifted a lock of hair from her back and kneaded her neck, then splashed it with water and moved away. *Is that it?*

Annalise raised her head to see him standing at the foot of the bath, his profile to her. His eyes were closed, his body tensed. He put his hand on his crotch and readjusted himself with a hiss. Annalise stared at him, wide-eyed. The crude gesture made her breathing frantic, and she felt heat pool low in her stomach. She shifted uncomfortably in the bath.

She wasn't a maiden; she knew that he was aroused. His shaft swelled, and he was ready to enter her core. Annalise swallowed. The thought should have been unpleasant. Nothing about the act was agreeable, but her body was reeling with excitement.

He turned to her with a predatory smile. "See something you like?"

Annalise raised her eyes to his. He caught her staring, and she burned even more in embarrassment.

His smile turned gentle, and he settled on his hunches in front of the bath. "Do not worry. I promised I wouldn't do anything you didn't want."

She remembered the night he came to her for the last time. His alcohol breath against her cheek, his hard shaft against her center. And his crude words. *It is your duty as a wife to pleasure me whenever I am hard, or I shall find someone else who will.*

"But last time... you said—"

Blake turned away with a grimace. "We said no past, love." His voice was hoarse, and he said the words as if against immense pain. He took a deep breath. "I was an idiot. I was young and foolish and the biggest arse this world had ever known."

Annalise smiled softly. "I am not disagreeing."

Blake let out a low laugh. "I have made a lot of mistakes. I have fallen hard in life. But one has to fall to learn. Let me prove to you I've learned. Let me atone for my sins."

"How?"

"I can start by rubbing your feet." Blake dipped his hand under the water and fished out her ankle. He washed her with soap before letting it drop and started rubbing the sole of her foot.

Annalise moaned and dropped her head back against the bath. He continued kneading her foot with his thumbs, then moved up to her calves, and every thought fled Annalise's

mind. He worked on her other foot, and she lay in the bath, enjoying her husband's ministrations. When he was done, she was languid and relaxed.

Blake brought a towel and wrapped her in it as she stood. He picked her up and carefully set her on the bed, then started drying her thoroughly.

Annalise studied the harsh lines of her husband's serious face as he kneeled before her, concentrating on drying her legs. "You would be a perfect maid, do you know?" she teased, hoping to get him out of his serious thoughts.

Blake smiled. "Are you offering me the work? I would gladly take the offer, but you would have to take care of the estates."

"Hmm, but will you be able to dress my hair?"

"I shall aspire to do your every bidding," he whispered as he straightened on his knees, his face mere inches away from hers.

Annalise stared into the impenetrable eyes of her husband, which darkened with passion. Annalise leaned forward until her lips touched his.

Blake closed his eyes but otherwise didn't move. Annalise's heart thumped loudly in her chest.

*Don't do this*, her mind warned.

*Just for today*, her heart answered.

Annalise opened her mouth and placed a soft kiss on Blake's lips.

Blake took her by her upper arms and eased her away. "What are you doing?"

"Kissing you," she answered hoarsely.

"Darling, this isn't what this was about," he whispered back.

"I know. I just need your comfort... I need you. Just for tonight."

Blake swallowed loudly. "What if tonight is not enough for me?"

"You said you'd do anything I ask of you tonight."

Blake nodded. "So I did."

"So I am asking. Kiss me."

The next moment, his lips were on hers. Hot, wet, demanding. He kissed her hungrily, like a ravenous wolf devouring its prey. Annalise wrapped her arms around his neck, and Blake picked her up and placed her on the bed.

He climbed on top of her, kissing her neck, her collarbone, then lowered his head and nipped on her nipple. Annalise yelped and almost shot off the bed. He raised his eyes, looking smug, then slowly lowered his mouth without taking his eyes off hers and licked around the

dark areola.

Wicked sensations shot down between her legs, and her breathing grew frantic. Blake took her nipple into his mouth and suckled lightly. Annalise squirmed, writhing beneath him. Her hands went to hug his head closer to her, and her thighs fell open, letting Blake settle between them comfortably.

Annalise ran her hands up his back, marveling at the way his muscles bunched beneath her touch. She wanted to take off his shirt and see his beautiful body naked to her gaze. She didn't remember him being so hard and large before he disappeared. She could hardly wrap her arms about his shoulders now. But he was infinitely gentle with her, kissing and licking her with the reverence he had never shown her before.

Blake softly nudged her legs farther apart, and she squirmed. It finally dawned on her that she was completely naked, open before him, while he was almost fully dressed.

"I shall not hurt you," he said, his gaze roaming her face. "I just want to bring you pleasure."

He brought his finger to her center and ran it through her feminine folds. Annalise moaned and lifted her hips. Blake settled more comfortably beside her, propping himself on one arm. His other hand was doing wicked things to her. He was playing with her folds, separating them, spreading the moisture he found there.

"Lord, you're beautiful," he whispered.

His finger traveled a little higher and encountered a sensitive nub. Annalise jumped in reaction.

"There you are," Blake murmured, then moved so that his face was right above her center.

He blew lightly, introducing a hitherto unknown sensation to her. Her hips lifted once again on their own accord, and Blake chuckled.

"Blake?" Annalise asked in uncertainty.

Her heart pounded loudly in her chest. She didn't know what she was asking for. She didn't know what he was going to do. She just knew that she wanted this to never end, and at the same time, she wanted something else. Something more.

Blake turned his head and placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to her inner thigh, then higher. He repeated the same ministrations to her other thigh, then moved up and kissed her below her navel. His afternoon stubble pricked her skin, adding more sensations to her overwrought nerve endings. Wave after wave heat covered Annalise's body, and she writhed as if in agony.

"Tell me what you want," Blake whispered against her skin.

"Blake, please."

"What do you want, love?" He raised his face to hers, his eyes heavy-lidded with passion, his lips puffy and wet.

Annalise closed her eyes, unable to hold his burning gaze. "Touch me," she breathed. "Kiss me."

"Where?" Blake trailed his finger down from her navel, leaving a fiery sensation in his path.

He slowed down when he encountered the patch of intimate hair, then leisurely, torturously circled the swelling nub above her center. Annalise raised her hips with an agonized moan. Blake put one hand on her abdomen, gently pushing her down onto the bed. He trailed his finger even lower and dipped it inside her center.

"Here?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes, Blake..."

He pushed his finger in while the heel of his palm was rubbing her most sensitive part. Annalise's hips moved of their own accord in rhythm with the movements of his finger. Blake gently added a second finger, stretching her, filling her.

Annalise cried his name and bunched the sheets in her hands. Then Blake lowered his head and licked her center. And the moment he did, Annalise lost all coherent thought.

Disjointed words and prayers escaped her mouth as she scrambled to chase the feeling that seemed to evade her. Nothing existed in this world anymore except for Annalise and Blake. His scandalous words like honey to her ears, his sensual touches like fire to her soul. His wicked tongue brought unfathomable sensations to the core of her. Her entire existence was concentrated upon a blissful feeling forming at her center.

With a scream, Annalise came back down to earth, panting as if she'd run for miles. She was hot, and her body still pulsed with the aftershocks of pure bliss. Annalise brushed her hair back, which stuck to her sweaty face, and looked down at Blake. He slowly withdrew his fingers, kissed her on her belly, and rolled away. With a groan, he placed his hand on his crotch and squeezed.

Blake's fingers shook as he undid the falls and took himself in hand. "God, how I want you, Annalise." The words were whispered like a prayer.

Annalise reached for him, but the moment she touched his hand, he moved away with a curse.

“No, Annalise. Don’t,” he said, his voice hoarse. “If you touch me, I shall lose the tiny remainder of my control.”

After the bliss he’d given her, Annalise truly didn’t mind if he lost control. In fact, she was buzzing with anticipation. She remembered the act to be unpleasant, but now there was an emptiness in the center of her, and she relished the thought of Blake filling her.

“I haven’t had a woman in over a year, my dear. If I take you now, I might inadvertently hurt you. And it’s the last thing I want to do. You deserve more. A lot more.”

“You didn’t...” Annalise faltered, but she couldn’t keep the question in any longer. They vowed that today they would not speak of the past. But it was no use. The curiosity, the jealousy, was burning inside her. She cleared her throat. “You didn’t have anyone when you were away?”

Blake, who was lying on his back, with his eyes closed, his face a grimace of pain, opened his eyes and shot a strange look at her. “Darling, I haven’t had anyone since the moment I met you. Anyone else, that is. The last time I was with a woman was with you, on our wedding night.” He grimaced and turned away from her.

She remembered that night clearly. But she didn’t believe his words. “What about your mistresses?”

“I’ve told you... I wasn’t unfaithful to you, I swear. I was angry with you after the wedding night, which is ridiculous, I know. I shouldn’t have been angry with you—I should have directed the fury at myself—but I was. And I thought... to humiliate you,” he said with a grimace and turned back to her, his eyes full of entreaty. “I was an arse and an idiot. I listened to my father. And after he died, I... Well, I took all his words as gospel. I know it doesn’t make it any better for you, but I swear... As selfish of an arse as I was, as callous and foolish, one thing I never was is unfaithful.”

Annalise sat up and looked around the room for her clothing. A dressing gown lay on the corner of the bed, so she took it and wrapped her naked form. She felt vulnerable naked around him. She felt even more vulnerable now that he’d confessed the hurt he had caused her in the past was on purpose. Did she dare believe that he was truly faithful, just cruel? Was one even better than the other? Her rioting thoughts battled in her mind.

“I shall never take anything from you again. I shall only give... anything you want.”

Annalise nodded without turning his way. “I would like to be alone now.”

“Of course.” Blake stood, hovered a few moments beside her, but then turned on his heel and stalked away.

# *The Marital Duty*



*Autumn 1739*

Blake had returned home drunk. It was common for him to appear at his home in a state of inebriation. He had not seen Annalise, much less come to her bed, since their wedding night. After that night, she'd demanded he never enter her chambers foxed, and since he was always foxed, he'd kept to her wishes.

But tonight was different, wasn't it?

His father's funeral had been three nights ago. And no matter their differences, it was Annalise's duty as his wife to comfort him, wasn't it?

His wife had already gone to bed. He had learned that from the servants. The feeling of loss and emptiness settled deep in his stomach.

He wished to spend time with her, to be with her, but all of what he knew about marriage was from his father. And everything his father taught him went against Blake's instincts.

His father was his mentor, his hero; the one Blake had looked up to his entire life and sought respect and admiration from. Now that he was dead, Blake needed more than ever to make his memory proud by following in his footsteps.

No, there would be no seeking comfort from his wife. His father would never have done that. He was tough, and Blake needed to be tough, too. He would go to Annalise's bed and demand his marital rights. She was in no position to thwart his advances.

Foxed or not, he was her husband, and it was her duty to pleasure him.

Blake remembered in a haze the night of their wedding, her frightened eyes, the way she'd stiffened in his arms.

He had never bedded a virgin. All of his previous liaisons were with the women of low virtue, the ones who gladly lowered themselves to their knees and put his cock between their lips. He never had to think about their pleasure or comfort.

Annalise, on the other hand, was untouched. Did she find him repulsive? He pushed the thought aside.



He climbed up the stairs and stopped in front of her door. They'd been married for over a month, and he hadn't seen her this entire time. He wondered if she'd enjoyed the reprieve. Or perhaps she was taking lovers herself. The thought painted red over his vision, and he knocked on the door before letting himself in.

Annalise peeked her head out of the covers and looked at him as he entered.

He could see her outline clearly in the moonlight. She was wearing a nightcap—an ugly piece of clothing he wished to throw into the fire. She looked confused, but as she realized it was Blake, she tensed immediately. The realization made Blake even angrier than he was before.

He stalked toward her, slightly swaying on his feet. “What, did you think you got a reprieve from me, wife?” he said with a drunken slur. “No such luck. I still need my heirs from you.” With that, he started undressing.

Annalise didn't take her eyes off him but didn't make a sound, either.

He wondered what thoughts were going through her head. Was she frightened of him? Would she rather he left? He finished undressing and climbed into bed beside her.

He was already hard as a rock, and the slide of his limbs against her warm skin didn't cool his ardor.

Instead of recoiling, Annalise propped herself on one elbow and placed a hand against his cheek. The scent of her enveloped his senses, and he couldn't help but lean into the warmth of her palm.

“I am sorry about your father,” she whispered. “I know you are grieving. I wish I could help you with it.”

The kind words brought tears to his eyes. *Real men don't cry*; his father's words burned at the back of his mind. *Only weaklings do*.

“You can and you will,” he said hoarsely.

He climbed half on top of her, and Annalise placed her hands on his shoulders and buried her face in his neck, bracing for him to begin. The trusting gesture sent a pang through his wretched heart. He rolled off her a little and looked at her face. Her eyes were shut, and her face was scrunched in fear.

“Look, you have nothing to be afraid of. It won't hurt this time. Or at least that's what they say.” His tone wasn't reassuring, and the drunken slur wasn't helping either.

Annalise opened her eyes and looked at him.

Blake slowly lowered his face and kissed her deeply. Annalise put a hand between them

and pushed on his chest. Blake stared at her, surprised.

“The taste of alcohol,” she said with a grimace. “I told you I do not like it.”

“Then we’ll get straight to rutting,” he slurred. “Feel this?” He ground his pelvis into hers, rubbing his cock against her quim. “It is your duty as a wife to pleasure me whenever I am hard, or I shall find someone else who will.”

“Blake,” Annalise said softly. “I do not ask a lot of you—”

“Will you leave me be? My father had just died!” Blake cried. “I deserve to drown my sorrows in a bottle.”

“I’d rather you shared your sorrows with me.”

Blake scoffed. *What a feminine sentiment.* “If you don’t want me drunk, then I shan’t come at all.”

Blake crawled out of bed and started collecting his clothing, swaying drunkenly. “I can find wenches to pleasure me a lot better than you do.” He turned to see Annalise’s shocked face, sketched her a bow, and walked away.

## Chapter 12



Blake stood, his back against Annalise's door for what seemed like forever. Her coldness, her reluctance to trust him, felt like a curse. No matter how close he got to her, she was ever farther away. And he deserved it.

What he didn't deserve was her kindness; neither did he deserve her passion. His body was still wound up after the interlude in her bedroom, but he refused to give himself the release he craved. He didn't deserve that, either.

That night in the long-ago memory when he had left her alone in her rooms, he'd remembered hearing her sobbing. His mind was so fogged with alcohol that he fell asleep rather quickly after that. But her sobs were forever etched into his mind.

This wasn't the worst thing, however. To spite her, after Annalise had rejected him, he'd gone out to a few society functions with a certain actress.

It didn't go beyond that. Just a few functions with a beautiful brunette on his arm. But that was enough to stir gossip, especially considering his newlywed status and that he was supposed to be in mourning.

Blake shut his eyes tightly, trying to force the horrible memories out of his mind. The torture, beatings, everything he'd endured at the hands of the criminals fell away at the memory of his wife's sobs.

And now he was asking her the impossible. To forgive him.

Blake pushed off the door and ventured down to his study. He couldn't spend another moment alone with his thoughts. He needed to work.

He went downstairs and buried himself in his ledgers. If he was busy working, there would be no room for dark memories in his mind. Perhaps, for a few hours, he could pretend that the past didn't exist.

Blake watched Annalise across the seat of a dimly lit carriage as she fidgeted and worriedly bit her lip all the way to Lady Lavinia's house. She'd avoided him the entire day, and if it wasn't for the theater outing, he wondered if he'd even see her today.

Annalise frowned, looking out the window. She didn't share her troubles with him, but he knew she worried about what to tell her friend regarding the man she loved and his ultimate betrothal. She worried even more about how to broach the subject of the tragedy that had befallen their mutual friend.

Blake wished he could take the worries off her shoulders and carry them himself. He wished he could solve all her problems, but it wasn't something he could do. He couldn't even give advice. The truth was, he had never cared about anybody else's plight the same way his wife worried about her friends.

A column had come out in the paper just this morning declaring the Marquess of Roth's untimely departure from this world. The paper didn't specify the cause of his demise. It simply stated that the old marquess's heart ceased to function. Of course, it had, but the precursor of such a tragic event wasn't revealed.

The carriage swayed and halted. Blake helped Annalise out, and they both entered Lady Lavinia's home. It was a nice and spacious townhouse with a dome-like hall. But the feel of the house was ominous.

The moment after that thought entered Blake's mind, a shriek came from somewhere above, and then the sound of shattered glass.

Blake exchanged a worried glance with his wife. There was a roar followed by slurred cursing, then the door shut violently, and hurried footsteps ran down the stairs. A beautiful lady in a provocatively low-cut gown descended the stairs. She palmed her disheveled hair as she walked and wiped at her face.

"Annalise, my darling! How glad I am to see you," she exclaimed as she finally noticed them. "Lord Payne."

Blake sketched a bow as she lowered herself in a gracious curtsy. She then walked toward Annalise and took her hands in hers. "I am so glad you are taking our dear Lavinia out to a theater. She is overjoyed."

"Is everything well?" Annalise asked with a strained smile.

"Yes, my dear. All is well. I shall go fetch Lavinia. She shouldn't keep you waiting so."

As the lady left, Blake turned to Annalise and raised a brow.

"Lavinia's father has a drinking problem. And when he is foxed, he has a temper problem."

She grimaced.

Blake swallowed. His father had been the same way. And although Blake had never been physically violent with Annalise, he had been cruel. If he hadn't been taken by thugs, would he have eventually turned into his sire?

"And the lady?" he asked, to change the subject of his dark thoughts.

Annalise furrowed her brows in confusion before her features cleared. "Oh, you mean Lady Birch. She is Lavinia's stepmother."

She seemed too young to be anybody's stepmother, but he also knew the old lords and their desire for younger wives to bear their heirs. Since Lady Lavinia was Lord Birch's only daughter, it seemed like the plan hadn't worked well for the old man.

Lady Lavinia rushed down the stairs a moment later. They exchanged pleasantries and quickly returned to the carriage.

Once they settled against the carriage seats, Lady Lavinia smoothed her skirts and addressed Annalise without taking her eyes off her hands. "I read this morning's paper about Caroline's uncle."

"Devastating, isn't it?" Annalise asked softly.

"Heartbreaking. I know how she loved her uncle. He was her only family."

Annalise uncomfortably cleared her throat.

"Who will be taking over the title? Do you know?" Lady Lavinia asked.

"No. As they said in the paper, the solicitor will be looking for an heir, a distant relative. But Caroline doesn't know who that might be." She paused. "But it shouldn't matter anymore. Not to Caroline... She will soon become the Duchess of Kensington."

A tense silence hung in the carriage. Lady Lavinia turned and looked out the window, her brows furrowed.

"I am so sorry, darling," Annalise said softly.

Lady Lavinia sniffed, and Blake fished out a handkerchief from his coat pocket.

"Here," he said and extended the piece of cloth.

She took it and wiped her face. "I suppose it wasn't meant to be," she said with a sad smile.

\* \* \*

By the time Blake, Annalise, and Lady Lavinia reached their reserved box, their friends were

already inside. Blake used the term “friends” loosely. He’d invited Jarvis, knowing full well he would bring his long-time friend Miss Olivia Manning and her parents, the Viscount and the Viscountess of Landen. Annalise and Lady Lavinia were happy to see Miss Olivia. Apparently, the three were friends.

Townsend also arrived at the box. He didn’t bring company, and Blake assumed he was only there to show his support for Blake.

After they exchanged pleasantries, Blake led Annalise to the seat in the front and settled next to her. Townsend escorted Lady Lavinia and sat to the right of Annalise. The Landens and Jarvis took the second row.

Conversation flowed around Blake as people exchanged gossip and discussed frivolous details of their days, but he was interested in none of that. His complete attention was absorbed by his wife, sitting demurely next to him, smiling at everyone and occasionally contributing a word or two to the conversation. With people busy conversing, he could finally sit and ogle his wife as much as he wanted.

Annalise wore a dark blue gown with silver embroidering on the bodice and sleeves. Her décolletage revealed just enough flesh to make his gaze constantly return to that part of her body. Her beautiful golden hair was swept up in an intricate coiffure.

As much as he loved to see her with her hair down, at the moment, he was glad he could see her milky white neck and the perfect shape of her ear. He wanted to lean in close and suckle on her earlobe. He’d dip his tongue into her ear and—

Annalise turned to him and raised a brow. Had he done something without realizing it? Perhaps he’d verbalized his thoughts? Blake’s neck heated.

Then he raised his head to see everyone looking at him quizzically.

Jarvis cleared his throat behind him. “Forgive my friend,” he said, with humor lining his voice. “I believe he was distracted by the vision that is his wife. Not that anyone can blame him.”

Ah, so he had been asked the question. Well, Jarvis—although not subtle—wasn’t wrong.

“Completely understandable,” Landen chimed in and patted his wife on the hand. “If I hadn’t seen my Edith in over a year, I wouldn’t be able to take my eyes off her either. I am surprised you are here at all, sharing her attention with us. Wouldn’t have faulted you if you locked yourselves in your townhouse for a month or two,” he added with a laugh.

Blake glanced toward Annalise as she blushed pretty pink.

“Can’t deprive the world of this beauty,” Blake said, not taking his eyes off his wife’s

heated cheeks. He took her hand and gently brought it to his lips, placing a soft, slow kiss on her knuckles.

"I was saying," Lord Landen said after clearing his throat. "When are you planning on joining us in Parliament?"

Blake raised his head and reluctantly peeled his eyes away from his enticing wife to regard the older man. "As a matter of fact, Townsend has been bringing me up to speed for the last several days. I think I am almost caught up with all the issues and am ready to take my seat by the end of the week. I just need to shear my hair and powder my wigs," he said with a grin.

"Good, good, we sure can use your help. I believe Townsend is a perfect person to bring you up to speed on these matters. It wasn't long ago that he was plucked from another country and seated at the House of Lords."

"From another country?" Blake turned to his cousin with a frown.

He looked at Townsend intently. The man had dark circles around his eyes. He looked tired, and he had a fresh, thin scar that disappeared behind his ear. What was that about?

"Yes, I was in France." He cleared his throat. "Painting, collecting art, auctioning it off. That sort of thing. You know about it. When I received the letter informing me of your... disappearance, I had to leave it all behind. Took me some time to get here. And even more time for me to get reacquainted with English shores before I felt comfortable enough to show my face in the House of Lords."

Blake narrowed his eyes in thought. "How long had you been in France before you received the letter?"

Townsend gave a shrug. "About two years. In fact, the letter about your father's passing reached me at the same time I received the news of your disappearance. I was quite in shock, to say the least."

"I don't think I knew that," Blake grumbled and turned away.

If that was true, and Townsend had been on the Continent when Blake had disappeared, it was unlikely he was the one to orchestrate the capture. Miles away, without up-to-date knowledge of either Blake or his father's whereabouts, it wasn't the perfect position for the nefarious plans. More importantly, he didn't seem happy about having to return to England and look after failing estates when he was just making a name for himself as an artist.

The conversation continued flowing about him until Lady Olivia—who'd sat picking at her gloves all this time and not participating in the conversation—pointed at the stage with

her fan in delighted glee. "Oh, look, the curtain is opening!" She stood and started clapping.

Everyone's attention turned back to the stage, and Blake was glad.

He didn't want to converse about the House of Lords. And he didn't want to think about his disappearance anymore. He would think about it when he got home. For now, he could resume silently feasting his eyes on his wife.

\* \* \*

Blake kept staring at her. Annalise felt his gaze burn through her to the bone. Her skin on the left side felt like it was on fire.

Why was he looking at her? She peeked at him through her lashes and caught his gaze. He winked at her, not at all embarrassed at being caught watching her so. Annalise returned her gaze to the stage but could no longer concentrate on the play.

Blake leaned in closer, his breath moving the wisps of hair at the nape of her neck. "You look exquisite," he said in a low, seductive voice that sent shivers down her spine.

"Would you watch the show?" she whispered back, not breaking her gaze from the stage.

"No," he said firmly, unapologetically. "I'd rather be watching you."

Annalise's cheeks caught fire, and she fanned her face, trying to cool them.

"Why didn't you wear the necklace I bought you?" he asked thoughtfully.

"It was too grand to wear to a simple theater outing. I believe a piece of jewelry like that requires a proper outing, like a queen's ball or—or a duke's wedding." She grimaced as she said the last. She didn't mean to insinuate anything by it, but she knew Blake's mind would jump straight to Kensington.

"I see," he said, his voice unfathomable. "Just as well; I like seeing your bare neck."

"Would you stop that?" she hissed between her teeth and finally turned to look at him.

Blake's eyes were glinting with mischief. A joyous smile played about his lips. He looked so young and carefree, the same Blake she had fallen in love with. Annalise couldn't hold back her own smile. His gaze dropped to her lips then and grew more intense, his eyes darkening. Annalise's breath started coming out in short gasps. Her heartbeat accelerated, and she felt a strange tingly feeling down low in her belly.

"Watch the show," Blake said in a hoarse whisper, returning his gaze to her eyes.

He winked at her, and Annalise shook her head before doing as he asked and turning



back to the stage.

No matter what she did, though, she was not able to concentrate on the play unraveling before her eyes. Actors were moving across the stage, proclaiming their love, crying their outrage in dramatic tones, and all Annalise could think about was that intense look in Blake's eyes.

The left side of her body tingled with awareness of him, and she had trouble sitting still. As if feeling the same way, Blake shifted in his seat. He leaned closer to her as if to peer at something in the auditorium below, and the fabric of his coat brushed against the already sensitive skin of her arm. Annalise closed her eyes, marveling at the sensation. Blake shifted again, and now his hand brushed against her gloved forearm.

Annalise opened her eyes and looked at him. Blake was watching the stage now, with rapt attention, his gaze intent, his mouth slightly open as if mesmerized by the play. His hand, however, still hovered over her arm. He ran his fingers slowly, lightly down her arm until he encountered her hand. He started drawing tiny circles on the back of her hand with feather-light touches. The action caused heat to course all through her body.

Annalise turned her hand palm up and caught his fingers, unable to take this sensual torture anymore. She heard a slight snort from his side and threw him a sideways glance.

Her husband, still not taking his attention from the stage, quirked his lips in a quick smile. He moved his hand and threaded his fingers with hers, his thumb running back and forth over hers. Annalise took a deep breath.

Somehow, this simple action, threading their fingers, made her feel content. She didn't feel like fidgeting anymore; she didn't feel the butterflies in her stomach. She felt as though the world had righted itself, and now, she was finally where she was supposed to be. She was home.

Suddenly, the audience erupted in cheers and applause. The box occupants jumped to their feet in excitement. Annalise instinctively dropped Blake's hand and stood, clapping and faking excitement when inside her, panic took hold where contentment existed just a moment ago.

A smile and a touch. Was that really all it took for Annalise to forget all the misery Blake had put her through? Was she really that naïve to simply forgive and move on, as if none of that had happened?

A footman entered their box and handed Blake a note. He opened it, and even though he held it closed in his hand, Annalise managed to see the writing.

It was written in a woman's hand. Just one word: *Come*.

## Chapter 13



What a bloody idiot he was, Blake thought as he sat next to his quiet, rigid wife. Blake had an unyielding suspicion that she had seen the note.

Why did he have to open it in front of her? He could've made a stealthy exit or just put it in his pocket and opened it later. After all, he was almost sure as to the contents of the note before he even opened it.

Now, Annalise sat with her back as straight as a lance, her eyes fixed upon the stage with an unblinking stare. She didn't let him touch her anymore; she didn't throw coy, flirtatious glances his way either. As a result, the second act of the show dragged on at a torturously slow pace.

No, opening that note in the box wasn't the reason he was an idiot. The main reason for his idiocy was taking his wife to a show performed by his former mistress. Not that he knew she would be performing. He hadn't checked the calendar. Besides, at that time, his thoughts were consumed by his wife and how to make her happy.

Blake hadn't given his former mistress a single thought from the moment he got captured, and he still wouldn't have if it weren't for this blasted note.

Blake couldn't fathom the reason why Melissa, a beautiful actress and an expert seductress, would even want to see him again, but he wasn't about to find out. He might have been an idiot, but he did have a modicum of intelligence left to ignore the summons of his former paramour and stay by his wife's side.

As soon as the show ended, Blake expelled a deep breath. He offered Annalise his arm and smiled sweetly at her.

"Did you enjoy the show, darling?" he asked with the hope that she wouldn't cut him in front of their friends.

"Very much." She threw him a quick flash of a smile, probably for the benefit of their companions, and placed her hand in the crook of his arm.

Blake covered her hand with his and patted it as if in reassurance. Who he was trying to

reassurance, her or himself, he wasn't quite sure.

They moved toward the exit, weaving their way through the crowd, which forced their bodies closer together. Annalise was pressed against his side, the scent of her perfume penetrating his senses. The softness of her limbs was a sweet kind of torture. Blake wanted to wrap his arms around her, pick her up, and leave this crowd with all haste. Instead, he was forced to walk slowly behind the old lords and ladies, smiling and making conversation as they did so.

By the time they reached their carriage and exchanged farewells with their companions, Blake felt irritable and anxious. He handed Lady Lavinia and Annalise into the carriage and beheld her surprised face as he entered after her.

"Is something amiss?" he asked as he settled next to her.

"You are coming home? With me?" she asked as if even the thought of it was difficult to fathom.

"Of course, I am coming home. Where else would I go?" he asked with a frown and then closed his eyes briefly. He couldn't play the aggrieved husband, surprised at her inability to trust him. She had reasons to mistrust him, after all. "You saw the note," he whispered hoarsely.

Annalise nodded.

"Let us discuss this later," he said quietly.

Annalise folded her hands demurely on her lap. She raised her head, smiled, and turned to her friend. "Did you enjoy the show, dear?"

"Very much," her friend answered exuberantly. "Thank you for inviting me tonight. I am glad I didn't miss the show."

It was clear to an untrained eye that both women were putting up a facade and trying to pretend that everything was well when their worlds were crumbling.

"Olivia had a beautiful gown on," Lady Lavinia commented.

"Yes, I believe it's one of the gowns she ordered during our last outing."

Lady Lavinia smiled sadly. "I remember."

"St. John has been a long-time friend to her, hasn't he?" Annalise asked.

"Mm, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I am just wondering if he is the gentleman she fancies." Annalise turned to Blake. "Do you know if St. John is Olivia's suitor?"

"No." Blake shook his head. "I am certain he is just being polite by escorting her places."

Their families have been friends for generations. Although with him, one can't ever tell."

Annalise frowned at him. "But he's your friend. Don't you ever talk about things like that?"

"About women?"

"Yes. Did you never tell him about me when we were courting?"

Blake grinned. "No. I married you so fast nobody had time to open their mouths. Good thing too. If I had delayed proposing, I would have been too late, and you would have married Kensington."

A silence hung in the carriage, and Blake bit his lip. Devil had him mentioning Kensington in the current company.

A few minutes later, they escorted Lady Lavinia to her townhouse and settled back into the carriage homebound.

Blake sat next to Annalise and scooted even closer. "Annalise." He put two fingers beneath her chin and lifted her face to his. "Can we talk about the note? I know you saw it."

"All right." Annalise raised her eyes to his.

"I can't change the past, darling," he said as softly as he could. "You have no idea how much I regret hurting you. I have no intention of ever doing so again. You have my word." He looked into her vulnerable eyes and let out a self-deprecating laugh. "You have no reason to trust my word either, do you? You will." He leaned closer to her and brushed her lips with his.

It wasn't even a kiss. He simply touched her lips with his and gave her a nudge. It was a gesture of affection, a reassurance, a promise.

Annalise turned to him more fully. "Was this woman one of your mistresses?"

"In the past, yes. Before we started courting. Before I even met you."

"But was she one of the women you were seen with after our wedding?"

Blake swallowed hard. Annalise was looking him directly in the eyes, not flinching, her features unfathomable. *Why are you asking this? Just let the past be in the past.* But he couldn't stay silent, and he wouldn't lie to her either.

"Yes," he said.

"Thank you." Annalise lowered her eyes, and Blake blinked in astonishment. "For not lying to me."

Blake cleared his throat. "I shall never lie to you. I promised, didn't I? And it means a lot to me that you are giving me this chance."

Annalise nodded but didn't say anything, and Blake scooted closer to her.

"You are the only woman I want. The only woman I have ever wanted this much. Let me prove it to you. Let me atone for all the hurt I've caused you." He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and softly turned her to look at him.

"How?" she asked quietly.

"Let me replace all the bad memories with the good ones. With pleasurable ones," he whispered and kissed her on the lips.

Annalise's eyes filled with tears. "I don't think it's enough," she whispered.

"Probably not," he agreed and wiped a stray tear away from her cheek. "But it's a start."

He lowered his head and kissed her softly. She didn't pull away, so he sipped on her lips, drinking her in. He trailed his hands down her sides, and she moaned sweetly into his mouth, feeding his excitement.

Blake picked her up and placed her on his lap. Annalise immediately wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Blake nudged her nose with his before kissing her hungrily. He licked the seam of her lips, and Annalise moaned. Blake repeated the action. This time, taking advantage of her parted lips, he swept his tongue inside her warmth.

He took her face between his hands and angled her head for a deeper kiss. Annalise's hands were in his hair, massaging his head. Blake moaned and broke the kiss. He breathed heavily, holding Annalise tightly in his arms.

Blake lowered his forehead to hers and stared into her downturned eyes. Their breaths mingled as they both panted, holding each other. Annalise's fingers curled into the lapels of his coat. He was about to kiss her again, but she leaned out of his reach.

Annalise bit on her lip and regarded him with a thoughtful expression on her face. "Is it different?" she asked. "With a mistress?"

Blake choked on his tongue. How did one answer such a question? "Well..." He uncomfortably shifted in his seat as Annalise continued studying him thoughtfully. He'd promised not to lie, hadn't he? "Yes," he finally pushed past his throat. "It is."

"Different how? Better?"

Blake's mind went blank for a moment. "No."

"You promised not to lie to me," she said innocently.

"I am not lying. The mistress usually is... more experienced in the art of pleasuring a man. She knows what to do and what men find arousing, but..." He raked a hand through his hair. "It isn't better, Annalise. At least not for me. The moment I laid eyes on you, nobody else occupied my thoughts. Even when we were... estranged. I wanted only you."

Annalise leaned forward so that their noses were almost touching. The closeness drove Blake wild. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, soaking in the feel of Annalise in his arms, the warmth of her breath on his face.

“Tell me what to do,” she whispered.

Blake opened his eyes and looked at her in confusion.

“I want to please you. Like a mistress would. Can you teach me?”

Blake gave a choked sound between laughter and astonishment. “No mistress could ever please me as you do.”

Annalise nudged Blake lightly with her nose, and Blake took a deep breath. His heartbeat accelerated, and his groin hardened even more.

“I want to experience passion the way I haven’t experienced before. If only just once.”

“We’ll have a lifetime of passion, my darling,” Blake whispered.

Annalise ducked her head and didn’t answer. Blake put a finger under her chin and tipped her face to his.

“Starting now,” he said before planting his lips on hers.

Annalise opened under the onslaught of his mouth, and Blake smiled before sweeping his tongue into her warmth. This was what he had been dreaming of all those days in captivity, all those months sailing back to English shores: Annalise, willing and pliant in his arms, the feel of her under his fingers, warm and soft.

He ducked his head and buried his face into the crook of her neck, not quite ready to believe this was actually happening. He breathed in her dear scent, then nipped on her silky skin. Blake trailed his mouth up to her ear and swirled his tongue around her earlobe, then licked the outer crescent.

Annalise whimpered and pressed herself closer to him. Blake helped her rearrange her skirts as she shifted to straddle him. His hands gently grazed her thighs, and they both groaned in pleasure. Blake shut his eyes tight and threw back his head. It was all he could do to not unfasten his breeches and impale Annalise hard upon his erect length. His cock was hard as steel and strained against the confines of his breeches.

But Blake didn’t want the quick release. He didn’t want this to end before it had time to begin. He wanted to drive Annalise mad with lust, to see her face when she cried in pleasure. He wanted to make her writhe and moan in passion. He wanted to remember every minute change of her features as she discovered previously unexplored levels of bliss. And he wanted her to experience all this in his arms, slowly, unhurriedly, and preferably, not in the carriage.

But she ran her hands up his arms and wove her fingers in his hair. She looked into his eyes, her own smoldering with a fiery passion, and he was lost.

His hand traveled up the inside of her thigh until he encountered her hot center, and he groaned. Annalise threw her head back, exposing her silky neck. Blake lowered his head and put his mouth on her, ready to devour, her salty skin awakening all his senses.

His eyes closed, and he moved his fingers, separating her folds, spreading the wet evidence of her desire while she writhed on top of him. With his other hand, he thrust his fingers into her hair, collected them in a tight fist, and pulled until she tipped back her head. Her mouth was slightly open, her eyes half-lidded, her lips wet.

Blake put his lips on hers and swept his tongue inside, scraping her lips with his teeth, licking at the silky interior of her mouth. Annalise took his face in her hands and pulled him closer while her hips started moving, guiding his fingers to where she was most sensitive.

She tore her mouth away and looked into his eyes, panting. "Tell me what to do," she whispered.

Blake leaned closer to her, then nipped on her lower lip. "Whatever you want," he said hoarsely. "Whatever feels like it's going to drive you to the farthest corners of bliss. Use me for your pleasure." He covered her lips with his, and she moaned into his mouth.

Blake trailed his mouth lower and suckled on her neck. And lower still until he encountered the sweet, soft mounds of her breasts. He swept his tongue inside the bodice, and she moaned, holding his head closer to her, her hips moving, pressing her quim against the heel of his palm.

Blake removed his hand from beneath her, and she whimpered in frustration.

"Wait a moment, love," he said hoarsely. "I want to see you."

He put his hands on her bodice and tugged it down until he freed her breasts and could see her nipples rising proudly against the cold carriage air. Blake hugged her closer and devoured her breasts with his mouth. He sucked on her sweet, soft flesh, his tongue flicking her hardened nipples.

Annalise writhed on top of him, moving her hips against his hard cock, and he hissed. He wanted to rid them both of all the clothing between them. He wanted to feast on her naked flesh, drink the evidence of her desire, lick every inch of her body.

Blake threw his head back in frustration. But then he saw Annalise. She was magnificent in the dim light of the carriage, her breasts naked to his gaze, her lips swollen from his kisses, her eyes half-lidded with passion.



Blake slowly placed his hand under her skirt and slid it against her leg until he reached her core. Annalise's hips bucked before she rubbed herself against the heel of his palm, writhing and taking her pleasure. Blake smiled and plunged one finger inside her core.

Annalise whimpered, but didn't stop, didn't even slow her movement. She was hot and tight, her inner muscles working on his finger, her nub rubbing against the heel of his palm. Blake kissed her urgently, swallowing her every moan, every breath. His other hand traveled to her breasts, pinching, playing with her nipples.

Annalise tore her mouth away and placed her forehead against his. "Blake, I..." She stopped as a pleasure-filled moan ripped from her throat. Her fingers curled harder into his shoulders.

Blake plunged a second finger inside her tight core and closed his eyes. Her scent, the sounds she made, the constant movement of her hips were driving him insane. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and watched Annalise as she moved on him, chasing her orgasm.

Blake couldn't take it anymore. He undid the falls of his breeches and took himself in hand. Annalise started moaning as her inner muscles contracted, and she started pulsing from the inside. Blake rubbed his hot, hard length in his hand, matching the rhythm of Annalise's hips. She screamed and sagged against him, and in a few moments, he was filled with bliss as hot liquid covered his hand.

Blake's chest rose and fell frantically with his every breath as he tried in vain to quiet his raging heartbeat. He rested his head against the carriage seat, and Annalise moved closer to him, burrowing her nose in the crook of his neck.

Blake slowly withdrew his fingers from Annalise's core, and she whimpered. He hugged her closer to him, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair.

The carriage suddenly drew to a halt, and Blake swore. Annalise sat up, her gaze panicked. Blake hastily helped raise her bodice, covering her beautiful breasts. He cuddled her cheek and placed a soft kiss on her mouth. The carriage door opened then, but Blake didn't let go of Annalise. Instead, he deepened the kiss.

When he raised his head, the footman was standing there, awkwardly looking away, still holding the door open.

"Close the door," Blake barked, and the servant obeyed.

Blake gently set Annalise aside and cleaned himself with a handkerchief. He buttoned up his breeches while Annalise adjusted her clothing. Her bodice was rumpled, and her coiffure was permanently ruined. Blake carefully took his coat off and covered her shoulders with it.

He then rapped on the door and escorted Annalise out of the carriage.

They made their way through the townhouse in silence. Annalise's arm in the crook of his. Her warmth was along his left side, her scent luring him to her. He paused beside Annalise's door. She turned and looked up at him. Another pause. His entire body buzzed in anticipation. He wanted to take her into his arms, throw her on the bed, and have his way with her. Slowly this time, unhurriedly, leisurely.

But he just held his breath and waited. Because he didn't want her for just one night, he wanted her forever. And in this case, he'd have to wait for her to come to him. Even if it killed him.

She opened the door, looked over her shoulder, and said, "Come."

## Chapter 14



Annalise entered her room and stopped in the middle. Blake slowly came up behind her and placed his hands on her waist. The heat from his hands traveled throughout her body, dulling all the other senses but the awareness of him. He softly kissed her ear, then her neck. Annalise tilted her head to give him better access, and he kissed her open-mouthed before grazing her skin with his teeth and sending shivers down her body.

He slowly turned her to face him and looked at her as if mesmerized. He then proceeded to take the pins out of her coiffure. He ran his hands through her hair when he was done, spreading it about her shoulders.

"You are beautiful," he whispered.

Annalise lowered her eyes.

"Are you certain you want to do this?" he asked.

Annalise took a deep breath. She wasn't certain. She still shook slightly from their interlude in the carriage. Her mind was reeling with excitement. She wanted more. But she was also scared out of her wits. Scared of what? Trusting Blake again or falling in love with him again? If she continued down this path, would she ever be able to leave him?

She smiled shyly and looked into his eyes. "I think so."

"I want you to be certain, darling."

"I don't know if I can be certain of anything right now."

Blake returned her smile and brushed the lock of hair from her shoulder. "We don't have to do anything more tonight, then. I'd rather you be certain."

Was he about to leave? Panic gripped her at the thought. Yes, she wasn't certain whether she wanted him or not, but she was certain she didn't want to be alone.

Lavinia's words rang through her mind.

*All I know is that if I were given two months to spend worry-free in blissful happiness with Kensington, if I was told he'd marry and I'd be miserable after, but I'd have the memories of these two months... I would take it.*

*And you could end up with a babe,* her heart whispered. Having made the decision, Annalise took his hands and tugged him closer.

Blake placed a soft kiss on her forehead. He was about to move away, but Annalise tipped her head and captured his mouth with hers.

Annalise kissed him deeply, desperately. She ran her hands up his hard chest until she encountered his cravat. She untied it with Blake's help and threw it to the floor. Next went his waistcoat.

"Annalise," he whispered, trying to take hold of her hands to slow her down.

"No, Blake. I am certain. Please, do not stop me."

Blake nodded and removed his hands. Annalise unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands over his hard, naked chest, feeling his warmth. She ran her fingers through his coarse hairs, his muscles bunching under her touch. She placed her hands over his heart, feeling the wild beating inside. Something metallic got caught under her palm, so she took it in her hand and raised it to her face. A locket.

Could it be? She raised her gaze to his but had trouble reading his expression in the dark room. Annalise went to the bedside table and lit a candle. Blake followed her close behind.

Annalise perched on the edge of the bed and tugged Blake to stand before her. She took the locket and rubbed it slowly.

"You kept this all this time," she whispered.

"Kept it?" Blake huffed. "It's the only thing that kept me sane."

She opened the locket, peered into her miniature, and smiled.

"It's a good likeness. I looked at it so many times during the past year and a half that I think it is engraved under my eyelids by now," he said quietly. "It is nothing compared to reality, though."

Annalise didn't take her eyes off the locket. She swallowed before speaking. "I didn't think you still had it," she said, matching his quiet tone of voice.

Blake put two fingers under Annalise's chin and lifted her face so she would meet his eyes. "You saved my life. I looked at that locket every day, and I swore I wouldn't die without seeing you again."

Annalise's heart made a curious jolt while her eyes filled with tears. Blake slowly lowered his head and kissed her. Annalise's hand went up to the nape of his head, and she pulled him closer, locket still in her hand, trapped between their bodies. She kissed him hungrily, enthusiastically, clinging to him and shaping her body to his.

With a groan, Blake lowered his torso and swept Annalise off the bed. He sat on the bed and gently lowered her to his lap.

Annalise let go of the locket, and her hand was in his hair, sifting through his locks. Blake pressed her closer to him, devouring her mouth, licking into her warmth, tasting her. She moved on him then, her bum brushing against his erect length. He was hard as a rock. Annalise's entire body hummed with the tension of an inevitable release.

Blake dragged his mouth away from her lips, and she whimpered. "Wait," he said, his voice hoarse. "You don't want this."

"I do, please. I want this. More than you know."

Blake groaned and swept his coat off her shoulders. He unbuttoned her bodice, then started working on the corset. Annalise ran her hands up and down his back, then lowered her head and bit on his neck and collarbone.

"Wait, darling," he whispered. "Let me get you good and naked first."

Annalise bit on his ear and heard him groan. "I don't want to wait," she whispered back and started working on the buttons of his breeches.

Blake chuckled. "Impatient wench."

He helped her undo the buttons and quickly stripped off his breeches and drawers. He tore the shirt off his shoulders, then got rid of her skirts. Annalise shivered before him in her chemise and stockings.

Blake took her into his arms and gently laid her on the bed. He climbed up on top of her and kissed her on the mouth, plunging his tongue inside, sending tingles through her body. Blake raised his head and studied her with a tender look in his eyes.

Annalise gazed back at him as he slowly twined their fingers on either side of her head. The gesture was so intimate and sweet that Annalise wanted to weep. Her eyes watered. Blake slowly lowered his head to hers and took her mouth in a sensual kiss. It was soft and wet and incredibly delicious. Annalise whimpered in frustration, wanting more of him, more of this closeness. She raised her hips and rubbed her pelvis against his hard, hot shaft.

With a groan, Blake drew away and sat up. He sat on his knees, panting and watching Annalise as a predator watched his prey. He ran a hand through his hair and scrambled from the bed.

Annalise sat up. "What are you doing?"

"I want to see you more clearly. To remember every detail of your face." He lit a few more candles. "I want to see every little reaction on your beautiful face as I make you come."

Annalise clenched her thighs together, her entire being pulsing in anticipation. Hot liquid pooled between her legs. She wanted to squirm, feeling uncomfortable in her own skin. More than that, she wanted Blake's hands on her again, his mouth devouring her. And she wanted to devour him in turn. She crawled closer to him, and... froze. Now in the light of many candles, she could see his back clearly. It was covered with thick white scars.

Blake turned back to her and beheld her shocked face. He winced but quickly hid behind an inscrutable mask.

"What... What are those marks?" she asked, terrified.

"You shouldn't have seen that," he said in a stricken voice. "I forgot they were there since I don't see my back too often." He stood and walked toward his shirt.

Annalise scrambled off the bed and followed him. She took the shirt from his slack fingers and put it away. When she turned to him, he stood rigid, his entire body trembling.

Annalise reached out her hand, but he stepped back.

"Did that happen when you were taken?"

"Yes."

Annalise swallowed. So when he talked about the past being painful, perhaps he meant literally. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

Blake raised his head then, his gaze blank. "No. I'd rather not."

"Is that... Does it hurt?"

Blake shook his head. "Not anymore."

His gaze was still distant, and he stood there, his hands fisted at his sides, his shoulders hunched. Like an animal ready for an attack or to flee. Annalise wanted nothing more than for him to confide in her, to trust her with his woes, to share his fears. She wished she could convince him that she could help him lift the burden. That he needn't do it alone.

He wasn't ready for that. He was not ready to let her in, and perhaps he never would be. But from the look of those scars, he went through something incredibly traumatic. She wouldn't be able to heal his scars, she knew. But for tonight, she could at least comfort him.

She stepped closer to him and reached out a hand, slowly as not to spook him. He watched her hand warily, but in the end, he put his hand in hers, and she tugged him closer.

Annalise enveloped him in a tight embrace the moment he stepped close enough and ran her hands up and down his back in soothing motions. She kissed his chest, then stood on her tiptoes and kissed the hollow below his throat. He chuckled, a low sound that reverberated through his chest, and Annalise smiled. Well, she'd gotten him out of his surly mood. She

reached up again and swirled her tongue against his skin.

Blake eased her away and looked at her with laughing eyes.

Annalise raised her brow. "Is anything not to your liking, my dear husband?"

"On the contrary, my dear wife, I like it all too much," he whispered and took her mouth in a scorching kiss.

Annalise didn't know how long the kiss lasted. But when Blake finally raised his head, they were both out of breath. Blake took her by the hand and led her back to bed. He laid her gently on her back and crawled on top of her. Then his mouth was on her again, robbing her of breath, robbing her mind of thought.

He moved lower, tracing his tongue along her skin, scorching her with his kisses. Then his mouth settled on her breast through the fabric of her shift. Annalise closed her eyes and covered his head with her hands. He suckled on her nipple unhurriedly, playing with it with his tongue, grazing her with his teeth. All Annalise could do was moan and arch into him, the wet material of her chemise heightening her senses.

He repeated the same ministrations to her other breast, then moved lower. He raised the skirt of her chemise over her waist, then dipped his tongue into her belly button, and Annalise squirmed.

Blake chuckled against her skin as he moved lower. He growled as he encountered her most private place. He raised his head and looked at her, his eyes glinting. Slowly, with infinite gentleness, he widened her legs and settled between them.

Annalise's hand instantly flew to cover her center. Blake took her fingers and kissed each one in turn. He then took her index finger and sucked on it. A strangled moan escaped Annalise's lips, and she tugged her hand away.

Blake turned his head and bit on her thigh, gently sucking on it to ease the pain.

He lowered his head and kissed her right between her legs. Annalise gasped and attempted to sit up, but Blake put a hand on her abdomen. "Lie still, my countess," he said, his voice hoarse. "It's my turn to play."

He lowered his head and licked between her feminine lips, then swirled his tongue around her sensitive, swollen nub. Annalise raised her hips, and he grunted in approval before placing his lips firmly on her and sucking hard.

"Do you like that?" he asked as he raised his head.

Annalise couldn't form a coherent thought. She just whimpered in answer.

"Show me what you like," he whispered and licked her feminine lips.

Blake lowered his head and feasted on her center, drinking in her juices, playing with her folds. All Annalise could do was move her hips in rhythm with his mouth and moan.

She placed her hand on his head and guided him where she wanted him. He licked the circle around her swollen nub, and a tiny scream escaped her lips. He did it again, and Annalise shut her eyelids while her hands fisted in his hair.

“Lower... yes, more!”

Blake moved per her instruction and placed his tongue flat just below her sensitive nub before wiggling his tongue.

With a scream, Annalise fell back, bright sparks shooting behind her eyelids. Blake continued licking and sucking on her, drawing the last pulses of her bliss.

Annalise lay panting, her limbs numb, sweat covering her body. Blake fell onto the bed next to her with a groan. He was tense, and his muscles bunched with his every breath; his erect length stood proud among the curls of intimate hair. He was thick and straining as if ready to burst. He took himself in hand and let out an agonized groan.

Annalise rolled onto her side and covered his hand with hers. Blake sucked in his breath.

“Annalise.” Her name was a prayer.

Annalise carefully pried his fingers off his erect length and covered it with her hand. Blake’s hips moved, thrusting his length into her hand.

“God, Annalise. How I dreamed of your touch,” he whispered reverently.

Annalise tightened her fist, marveling at the steely hardness beneath her fingers, and soft silk of his skin. It jolted in her hand, and Annalise relaxed her hold. She raised her eyes to Blake. He had a grimace of pain on his face.

“Does it hurt?”

“No,” he pushed past his throat. “It’s... it’s too good.”

Annalise smiled. She took him in hand again and experimentally ran her hand up and down his length. She raised her eyes to his again. “What do I do?”

He took a deep breath, then covered her hand with his and guided her along his length, squeezing her hand, running it up and down. A drop of liquid seeped out from the slit on top. Annalise ran her thumb over it, and Blake groaned. She instantly pulled her hand away.

“Do it again,” Blake said on a hiss.

Annalise slowly reached out her hand and ran a thumb over the head of his shaft. Blake moaned and thrust his length into her hand again. His eyes were closed, his face a grimace of agony. Curious, Annalise leaned down and licked him. Blake swore.



Annalise smiled and licked her lips. The taste of him lingered on her tongue. Salty and with a bit of musk. She wanted more, so she enveloped the head of his shaft into the warmth of her mouth and sucked on him.

With a violent curse, Blake shot off the bed. The entire world whirled around, and the next thing she knew, Annalise was down on her back, with Blake straddling her hips, his face only an inch away from hers.

"You are done playing, love," he growled.

Annalise blinked, her breaths coming in pants, her breasts rubbing against his chest. She wasn't scared of him. She wasn't scared of what was coming next. Her body tingled in anticipation instead. She smiled and placed her hand softly against his cheek. "Now what?" she whispered.

His gaze turned gentle in an instant. He looked at her as if staring straight into her soul.

"Now," he said and kissed her gently on her lips. "Now I get to finally have my wife."

Annalise felt Blake's hot, hard shaft against her center, and her head fell back with a low moan. Blake took her face between his palms and kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue inside and taking what she freely offered. When he was done, he stared into her eyes.

"Don't close your eyes," he whispered. "I want to see you come."

Annalise grabbed his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips. Blake dropped his forehead to hers and whispered her name.

In one quick thrust, he was inside her. Hot, hard, thick, and oh, so delicious.

Annalise raised her hips to take more of him until he was inside her to the hilt. The feeling of her nub rubbing against him made her moan. Blake withdrew a little and then thrust back in. Annalise moaned and grabbed at his shoulders harder. She burrowed her head into the crook of his neck, but he nudged her lightly.

"No, I want to see your face," he said as he looked at her. Then without taking his eyes off her, he withdrew and thrust in again.

Annalise's eyes closed on impact, but she opened them again, and Blake grinned. "Yes, darling. Just like that."

And he thrust again. Annalise moaned with every thrust of his hips, her own pelvis rising to meet his. She fought to keep her eyes open, watching as Blake's eyes shone with hunger. He lowered his mouth to give her a wet, hard kiss. Annalise bit on his lips, then let go of his mouth, unable to keep her own closed, moans tearing out of her with every thrust of his hips.

Annalise's entire attention was concentrated upon the spot where Blake was joined with

her. Rubbing against her center, sending frills of sensation throughout her body.

Finally, Blake placed a finger against her nub and rubbed it in circular motions. This was enough to send her reeling down the spiral of bliss.

Her breaths mingled with Blake's, and their moans turned into one as the bright white sparks filled her vision and the feeling of absolute bliss filled her body and soul.

Annalise felt hot liquid fill her as Blake found his release before he collapsed on top of her with a groan.

\* \* \*

Blake woke up in a cold sweat. He shot up, his hands outstretched. It was pitch black darkness. His breathing was labored, and his gaze searched the room, trying to find a line of light, anywhere.

Where was he? Was he still in the dungeon? Was his return home, all the time he had spent with Annalise, just another torturous dream?

He turned his head and saw his wife, lying on her side, the even rise and fall of her chest indicating she was in a deep slumber.

Blake's breathing slowly returned to normal. He was back home. It was just a dream.

He lay on his side, facing his wife, and watched her sleep.

She looked serene, one hand under the pillow, another beside her. Her hair covered half of her face. She was warm and rosy-cheeked. His little savior.

His face split into a gentle smile. She was tired after their love-making and was dreaming peacefully. He wished he could join her in deep slumber, but the dreams he had were not the peaceful type.

Ever since his return home, in his nightmares, he either saw himself back in the torture dungeon or on the deck of the slave ship witnessing the depravities.

Blake shifted uncomfortably. His wife had no idea what he was running from. His mind was full of torturous visions, and he couldn't dispel them, no matter what.

He knew only one thing. He needed to find the thugs who'd captured him and soon. Before they found him instead.

## Chapter 15



Annalise woke up as a line of sun peeked into her room from behind the curtains. She squirmed, not willing to wake up yet. Then she turned, lying half across the bed. Her hair got into her face, and she blew on it to move it away, with no luck. She finally turned on her back and scrubbed her hair away from her face. That was one of the reasons she always wore a nightcap to bed.

Not last night, though. A blush crept up her neck from the memory. She opened her eyes and looked around. Blake was nowhere to be found. She didn't expect to find him in her bed, although she hoped she would.

On the other hand, she was glad she had time to compose herself and to think through the events of the night before.

She squirmed, remembering how she behaved. She had been like an animal, licking and biting him, fighting for her release. Her cheeks heated even more, and she closed her eyes. She had been completely naked and open before him, unashamedly so. She should have been scandalized when he put his lips on her feminine folds, but she'd pushed her hips into his face instead.

Annalise took a pillow and covered her face with it. The cool material calmed her mind. What would Blake think of her now? He didn't seem repulsed by her; on the contrary, he'd urged her on, encouraging her wanton behavior.

She stretched in bed, her muscles aching like after a day of hard work. She put the pillows against the headboard and leaned against them. She felt rested, but at the same time, she had an uncharacteristic urge to lie in bed all day. She looked around the room. Blake's clothing was still strewn around the floor, the same as hers.

She and Blake had made quite a bit of a mess last night, she thought with a muffled chuckle. She bit on her lip. Where was he? Why wasn't he in bed with her?

She sat up, clutching the quilt to her naked form. Her dressing gown didn't lay on the chair, as it always did. Right, Ruth hadn't come into her room last night to undress her. That

honor belonged to her husband. Annalise took a deep breath and slid from the bed. She sauntered into the dressing room completely naked, the cool air wafting around her naked form. She felt exposed. More so than she did the night before, even though she was completely alone in the room. Even though she walked straight into the dressing room and wasn't lying open before Blake.

Annalise shivered just thinking of last night.

Was that what marital duty was supposed to be like? If so, where had it all gone wrong before?

Why couldn't it have been like that from the beginning? When she was still young and naïve and believed that Blake was her prince. When she could still dream of exploring the world with him, when she believed he would allow her into his soul.

Blake had been in one state of inebriation or another for most of their married life. Perhaps that was the reason their previous acts of love were lacking. Or maybe the fault lay with her. She had been too rigid, too frightened. Annalise heaved a sigh.

There was no reason to overthink this. This—last night—was the only thing working delightfully well in their marriage. Perhaps, she would be with child too. She placed a hand on her abdomen. It only took once the last time.

Annalise took a dressing gown and put it on, covering her body and storing the memories of the night before deep inside. She performed her morning ablutions, dressed, and went to look for her husband.

Annalise ventured straight into his study, since that's where he spent most of his days. It turned out she was right. She opened the door, peeked inside, and saw him sleeping, his forehead resting on his arm. He still wore his banyan, so he wasn't waiting for visitors. Annalise frowned. Why had he left her bed only to go to his study and fall asleep? She silently shuffled toward him.

Blake still had a quill in his hand and an open journal under his arms.

Annalise perched herself on the desk before him and ran her hand softly through his hair.

Blake sat up with a start, startling her.

"What are—" He frowned at her, then looked around and cleared his throat. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously," Annalise said with a light smile. Blake looked disturbed, out of sorts.

"This hasn't happened in a while," he said hoarsely.

"What hasn't happened?"

Blake's gaze settled on her, and he took her hand in his. He lightly played with her fingers, all the while studying her form. "You must have tired me out last night."

Annalise felt herself blush. "Was it all right? What I did... What we did." She looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

Blake brought her fingers to his lips and kissed each one with slow deliberation. "It was... exceptional."

Annalise fought to conceal her smile. "Why did you leave then?"

Blake heaved a sigh and tugged on her arm. Annalise stood, and Blake sat her onto his lap. He brushed the stray lock away from her face, slowly running his fingers down her cheek.

"I can't sleep on the bed. It's too soft."

Annalise frowned and was about to ask more, but he placed his lips on hers.

Annalise melted under the firm onslaught of his kisses. She licked at his mouth, then bit him lightly on his bottom lip.

Blake chuckled and drew her closer to him. Annalise felt the hard bulge of his erection under her bottom.

"Blake?" she asked against his mouth.

"Yes, my dear." Blake moved to kiss her neck, and Annalise's head fell back.

He squeezed her bottom, and then his hands traveled up to her breasts. Her peaks stood proudly against his caress, and Annalise moaned, wanting to get more. Suddenly her clothes were uncomfortable, fabric sticking to her heated skin. She wanted to get rid of it so there would be nothing between her and Blake anymore.

Apparently, Blake had the same idea because he lifted her off his lap, seated her on top of his desk, stood, and discarded his banyan.

Annalise's breath caught. Blake, in his complete nakedness, was glorious. His muscles were beautifully sculpted, his body bronzed with a dusting of hair in all the right places. He had a few white scars along his body, but they didn't detract from his male beauty. Her gaze lowered, and her mouth went dry at the vision before her.

Blake's erect length stood proud and swollen among the curls of intimate hair. It was red and pulsing, veins covering the entire length.

She took it in hand, and Blake groaned. He stepped closer, standing between her legs. Annalise ran her hands up and down, remembering how Blake taught her the night before. She squeezed him with one hand while her other hand went lower, exploring his length. She traveled down still and ran her fingers against the soft, hot sack below his erection. Blake

placed his hands on either side of her, his face just inches away from hers, his breath hot on her face.

She cupped his sack in her hand, and Blake growled.

"Enough," he whispered, then bit on her earlobe. "Turn around."

His whisper against her ear caused goosebumps to run along her body. Her breathing grew frantic, and her body heated wildly. Annalise scrambled off the desk, and Blake roughly turned her around.

He raised her skirts above her waist and bent her over the desk. His finger traced the slit between her buttocks, then traveled lower. Then his hot erection replaced his finger and settled against her bottom.

Annalise panted as if she were running for miles during the impossible summer heat. Blake snaked his hand around her and cupped her between her legs. Annalise pressed herself into his hand, at the same time craving the connection with his rod behind her. As if feeling her turmoil, Blake pressed his groin against her, rubbing her wet, feminine folds with his hard shaft.

Annalise moaned, and then his fingers were playing with her swollen nub, his length poised at her entrance. She pressed her hands against the desk and arched her back.

Blake leaned in and bit her on her neck. The pain added to overall sensations, driving her wild. With one quick thrust, Blake entered her, stretching her core. He panted in her ear while his hips thrust his length into her in an unrelenting rhythm, his pelvis meeting her rear with resounding smacks.

Annalise bit on her lip so as not to scream while her moans and Blake's grunts melded into one. She pulsed from the inside as the feeling of bliss hit her. She closed her eyes and thrust out her hands, sweeping the paper and ledgers off the desk onto the floor.

Blake growled as his hot seed filled her. He playfully smacked her on her rear and then massaged her buttocks.

"You're so damn beautiful," he whispered.

At that moment, half lying on the desk, her skirts above her waist, her hair out of sorts, sweat running down her body, and other liquids running down her legs, Annalise felt anything but beautiful.

It didn't matter, though, as long as Blake thought so. He slowly withdrew, and Annalise's inner muscles constricted on emptiness. She was about to get up, but Blake put his hand on one butt cheek.

“Wait a moment.” He fished out a handkerchief and cleaned her legs, her bottom, and between her legs from their mutual juices. He placed a hot kiss on her bottom, making her squirm, then lowered her skirts.

Blake helped her get off the desk and cleaned himself up as well.

“Well,” Annalise breathed. “I just came here to enquire if you would like some breakfast.”

Blake gave her a wolfish smile. “That was the best inquiry I received in my life.” He kissed her on the forehead, then took her hands in his again, as if he couldn’t stand next to her without touching. He peered at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“My solicitor should be here any minute.” He looked around, picked up his banyan, and threw it over his shoulders. “I need to get ready before he gets here; clean up.”

He gestured at the mess they’d made on and around the desk.

Annalise watched in disappointment as Blake covered his muscled torso and fastened his banyan at the waist. The attire was usually worn over breeches and a shirt, but Annalise wasn’t about to complain about that.

She raised her head and gave an apologetic smile. “Should I ask the housekeeper to bring you breakfast here?”

“Wasn’t I supposed to be the one bringing you breakfast in the morning?”

Annalise smiled. “I’ll just have to count this encounter as a consolation prize.”

“So generous.” He kissed her softly on the mouth. “Yes, I think I’d rather break my fast at my desk. There are lots of things to be done.”

Annalise disengaged her hands from his and went around the desk. She bent to pick up his journal and peered into the page it was open on. It had her name on it. Only it was crossed out.

Blake kneeled before her and reached to take the journal from her hand.

Annalise pulled her hand away. “Wait, what is this?” She peered into the contents and read aloud. “*Possible plotters behind my capture.*” She scanned the page with her eyes, reading the list of people and the motives until she came to the end.

*Annalise. Motive: freedom.*

Blake finally leaned in, took the journal from her slack fingers, and closed it.

Annalise turned to him, her eyes wide. “Possible plotters behind your capture? Did you truly think—”

“No!” he interrupted her swiftly. “No, I did not.”

“Then why is my name on it?”

"I scratched it out the next day."

Annalise raised a brow.

"I was sleep-deprived, tired, and angry. I came home to find you getting betrothed to Kensington. You didn't seem glad to see me at all. My mind was a jumbled mess. I swear, I never seriously contemplated you might be the one to hurt me."

Annalise shut her eyes tightly against the burning sensation. The scars on his back and torso, those months, which he had said were too gruesome for him to speak of, he thought her responsible for all of that.

Annalise swallowed and stood. "There is no trust in our relationship at all, is there?"

"I trust you with my life," Blake said hoarsely. "This was just a mistake."

*I trust you with my life.* Did she trust him with hers?

Annalise backed away from her husband. "I am not certain how I feel about this, Blake. In order to put me on that list, you must have thought so low of me. And the rest of those people? They are the closest people to you besides me. How can you be suspicious of them?"

"Kensington is not the closest person to me."

"He is to me."

"And that is why his name is on there." Blake closed his eyes. "I do not want to argue, darling. I crossed out his name too, but I have to be suspicious of people. I cannot be as gullible and naive as—"

He halted suddenly, but Annalise knew what he wanted to say. *As me.*

"I have to go," she said and turned to leave.

Blake grabbed her by her arm. "Not like this."

Annalise took a deep breath. "I need to be alone right now. Please respect my wishes." She disengaged from his hold and walked away.

\* \* \*

Blake perched on Annalise's bed later that evening, his arms across his chest. He'd spent a good part of the day running around his cousin's house, attempting to catch her "gift." His hands were all scratched up, and he even had a tiny scratch on his face. But it would be all worth it just to see the reaction on Annalise's face.

When he'd come home, Annalise was still entertaining callers, so he sneaked into her



room and awaited her arrival.

The door squeaked open, and Annalise walked inside. Her expression was thoughtful, a few lines on her forehead forming a light frown. But her features cleared the moment she saw him. It was a good sign.

“Apologizing, lately, has been a new pastime for me,” he said. “I’ve been an arse, yet again. But to atone for my sins, I am bearing a gift, and I hope you find it worthy.”

He made a few strides toward her and took her hands in his. Annalise tipped her head back, so she could look into his eyes.

A loud mewling sound came from behind Blake. Annalise frowned before peeking behind him. Her mouth slacked open, and her eyes widened.

She ran toward her bed in a girlish glee and took the kitten into her arms.

“Wait!” Blake exclaimed, but she’d already picked him up and cuddled him close to her heart.

Blake raised an eyebrow. He had gone to Townsend’s house in the afternoon to discuss business matters. He’d needed to take his mind off the argument he’d had with Annalise. Instead, he wound up chasing a little black kitten around his cousin’s townhouse. It turned out, Townsend had managed to give away all but two of his mother’s kittens, and this one, the most problematic one, was at risk of being drowned.

Blake immediately decided to take in the little fiend from hell. Now the same angry damned animal that’d scratched Blake’s hands and face, snuggled tenderly in Annalise’s arms and purred.

Blake frowned. “I see he likes you.”

Annalise held him closer to her chest, and the kitten put his head on her soft breasts. Well, Blake couldn’t fault the damn thing; he’d be snuggling up on her breasts too.

“I was afraid he’d give you the runaround too. Townsend didn’t know how to dispose of the poor thing. Apparently, it made their lives quite difficult in the past few days. I didn’t think you’d forgive me if I let anything bad happen to a defenseless kitten, so here he is. Besides, we have a lot more staff than Townsend. I think we can manage one little animal.”

“This little thing?” Annalise smiled and sat on the bed. “I shall take care of him myself.”

Blake walked up to Annalise and stretched his arm out to pet the kitten, but he hissed and bared his claws.

“I’d rather not touch him,” Blake said with a frown. “I do not blame him. He picked the most beautiful lady to snuggle up to and is not letting anyone else touch him. I can

empathize.”

Annalise raised her smiling eyes to his.

“Can you forgive me for the thoughtless entry in my journal?”

Annalise pursed her lips as she continued petting the kitten. “I have not decided yet.”

“Hmm, then I shall try harder to earn your forgiveness,” he breathed. At least, she was talking to him.

“Blake whatever you went through is terrible. Those scars, the memories you claim to not want to share with me... If you thought for a moment that I was responsible for any of that then we have a bigger problem than I initially thought. Is that why you were secretive of your past?”

“No, darling, trust me. Writing your name down was an impulse. A foolish act of a jealous man.”

Annalise paused before saying quietly, “Lavinia made Kensington propose to me.”

“Did she?”

“When I received a note about your demise... I was not only destitute—”

“I know,” Blake interrupted with a grimace. “Kensington explained to me that he was just doing a duty by offering you his name.”

“He is a good man.” Blake didn’t answer. “And Lavinia convinced me she wasn’t in love with him and sacrificed her own happiness for me.”

“She loves you,” he said. “I can empathize with that too.”

Annalise looked at him curiously, her eyes taking on a puzzled look. She looked down at the kitten then and stroked his fur.

Blake cleared his throat. “What would you like to call him?”

“Mm, I do not know.” Annalise’s features cleared instantly. “Well, he is pretty loud in announcing his presence, so perhaps, Sir Meows-a-lot.”

Blake let out a snort. “That’s... very clever.”

Annalise laughed softly. “That is not a very dignifying name, is it? Perhaps I need to think on it a little more.”

Blake grinned. “I like Sir Meows-a-lot.” He gestured to the corner and stood. “Well, there’s a basket with some rags for him to sleep in.”

Annalise looked at the basket while still petting the animal and crooning sweet words to its ears. Blake heaved a sigh. He’d give up his title to be in this ragged animal’s place.

“Did anyone feed him?” she asked.

“The kitchen help tried, but he was... not responsive.”

“Oh, the poor little one is hungry, is he?” she crooned and stood. “I’ll go and take care of him.”

She stepped toward Blake, stood on her tiptoes, and placed a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered and left the room.

Chasing around that fiend half the day, then driving home with it in a carriage, was all worth it for just one soft kiss from her and a smile.

## Chapter 16



Annalise sat by the window in the drawing room and fingered the edge of a correspondence she received earlier that day from Caroline. Caroline had sent her regrets that she wouldn't be able to attend Annalise's grand ball, not that Annalise expected her to since Caroline was in mourning. In the letter, she insisted that she needed to be alone, so she'd withdrawn to the Marquess of Roth's country seat in Devon right after his funeral to stay there until her inevitable marriage to Kensington.

Everybody's lives had turned upside down in a matter of weeks. Her friends were miserable without a fault of their own. Annalise's inner turmoil was wreaking havoc on her sanity too.

She hadn't seen Blake since the night he'd gifted her the kitten. He hadn't come to her bedroom since, and she wondered if she even wanted him to. The fact that he even for a moment suspected her involvement in his disappearance hurt her beyond any words. She wasn't certain she was ready to forgive him. He'd said he trusted her with his life, and yet he kept so many things from her. She was the one with the reason not to trust him, not the other way around.

With the day of their grand ball approaching, however, she didn't have much time to contemplate her feelings toward her husband. She'd deal with it all once the ball was over. Then, she'd be free to leave him if she thought it was her best option.

*What about a child?* her treacherous heart whispered. Annalise squeezed her eyes shut, praying for there to be a babe in her belly.

The door opened, and Blake entered the room. The kitten followed in his wake and then jumped on Annalise's lap.

"I see the fiend followed me. We both missed you. Although I more so than Sir Meows-a-lot."

"Actually..." Annalise chuckled. "It turns out she is a lady. I found out when Ruth and I were bathing her."

Blake sputtered a laugh. "Are you going to rename her?"

"Well, I am not going to call her Sir."

"It's not like she is acting at all like a lady."

"Hmm." Annalise thought as she stroked the kitten's black fur. "Not a lady then. How about Galinthias?"

"I like it. She seems formidable enough to stand up to a Goddess."

Annalise picked up the kitten and looked into her glowing, green eyes. "Are you Galinthias? Or I can call you Miss Gale for short?"

The kitten meowed, and Annalise laughed. "I think Miss Gale has spoken."

"Well, I think it fits perfectly," Blake said.

He continued to say something more, but Annalise felt warm liquid seep out between her legs, and she stilled. Her eyes widened, making Blake halt mid-sentence.

Her courses.

She put the kitten on the floor, excused herself, and rushed to her room. She raised her skirts just to see that she was right. Her courses had started.

Annalise swallowed and blinked back the tears. The hope she was harboring that she might be with child had been dashed at the sight of her blood. She walked to the washing closet to arrange for a padding made of linens. Tears burned at the back of her eyes. and Annalise wanted to scream in anguish.

She rang for Ruth, who helped her dress into her chemise and a dressing gown, and settled into bed. Miss Gale jumped onto the bed the moment Annalise drew the sheets over her body and lay on her belly.

Annalise wiped at her tears. There'd be no babe, at least not soon, and the thought depressed her more than she'd thought it would.

About half an hour later, just as Annalise was drifting off to sleep, a light rap on the door startled her awake.

"Who is it?" she called irritably.

The door opened, and Blake peeked inside. "Are you all right? Your maid told me you prepared for bed... you didn't even have supper." He walked into the room and toward the bed with sure strides.

"I am well. Just a little light-headed, that's all."

Blake sat on the edge of her bed, startling Miss Gale. She hissed at him, turned a couple of times in place, and settled back on Annalise's stomach.

"Darling, what is wrong?" Blake looked at her with such tenderness that she felt tears forming at the back of her eyes.

She closed her eyes, and tears streamed down her face. "My courses started today," she whispered.

Blake took her hand and gently caressed her fingers. "Does it hurt?"

Annalise let out a small laugh. "No. Well, a little, but it's not a bother."

"Then why are you crying?"

"I thought..." She swallowed. "I hoped that I'd be with child by now."

Blake frowned in confusion, and Annalise looked away.

"That's... I'm sorry." He reached out, took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and turned her to face him. "But it's not a big deal. We shall try again, I promise."

A smile was lining his voice, and a sob tore from Annalise's mouth.

Blake kissed her gently on her forehead. "Darling, why does it bother you so?"

Annalise wiped her tears. *Because it reminds me of the child that could have been.* She didn't say that out loud. She couldn't.

"What if I can't have children?" she asked instead.

"We've only spent one night, darling. I am certain it needs more time than that."

*Last time it took just one night.* She lowered her eyes but didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry, darling," Blake whispered and kissed her softly on her cheek. "You don't have to say that if you don't want to. But do you mind if I stay here with you?"

"Blake, I can't... I am not comfortable doing that while I have my monthly courses."

"Doing that... Do you mean sleeping in one bed with me?"

"No, I mean the other thing," she grumbled.

Blake pursed his lips, holding back his laughter. "Darling, I don't need the other thing from you every night. It would be nice, yes, I shan't deny it. But right now, I just want to hold you in my arms and comfort you."

Another tear streaked down Annalise's cheek, and Blake wiped it away.

"Do you mind if we place Miss Gale from hell into her basket? I do not think she appreciates me being near her."

Annalise smiled and shook her head.

Blake reached for the cat, but she jumped out of bed with a hiss, not letting him even touch her. Annalise fought to hold on to her laughter.

"That fiend does not like me at all, does she?"

Annalise shook her head. "Do not take it personally. She is avoiding all men. Hisses at Crane and all footmen all the time."

Blake pulled back the covers and scooted inside. He covered them both, turned Annalise to face him, and placed the softest kiss on her mouth.

When he was about to pull back, Annalise snaked her arm around his neck and kissed him deeply. Blake groaned and swept his tongue inside, teasing her, licking at the corners of her mouth.

When he pulled away, they were both breathless. Annalise's breasts chafed against the fabric of her nightgown uncomfortably.

Blake ran his hands up her sides and caressed her breasts. He then lowered his head and licked at her nipples through the fabric.

Annalise arched against him, tension building up between her thighs.

"No, Blake, please," she whispered, her chest rising and falling from the intensity of her breaths.

Blake raised his head and looked at her. His eyes were heavy-lidded with passion, his mouth wet and puffy from their kisses.

Annalise scrubbed his night stubble with her hand. Blake caught her palm against his cheek and kissed it.

"If that's what you want," he said hoarsely.

He lay back, pulling Annalise close to him. He placed her head in the crook of his arm and kissed her hair.

"Sleep, my darling, I shall be watching over you," he whispered.

Annalise curled into his side and hugged him tightly. "Will you be here when I wake up?"

Blake buried his nose into her hair and inhaled. "Yes, my darling. I shall be here."

Annalise snuggled closer to him, and in a moment's time, she was asleep.

\* \* \*

Blake woke up at a light rap on the door.

He was a light sleeper. He had to be. Anyone who wasn't didn't live long on the slave ship. He turned and grazed his hand against the warm body of his wife.

She slept peacefully snoring, her chest rising and falling with her soft breaths.

Blake wanted to snuggle closer to her and fall back to sleep, but another rap on the door reminded him that something needed his attention beyond the walls of this bedchamber. With a sigh, Blake slowly rolled off the bed, trying not to wake his wife.

She didn't seem disturbed by either the incessant knocking or by Blake's movements. Good.

Blake wrapped himself in a sheet and shuffled to the door. He exited the room and beheld his valet at the door.

"A visitor, my lord," the valet whispered.

"Does this visitor know what time it is?" Blake whispered back.

"He insisted it is urgent, my lord," the valet said meekly.

Blake heaved a sigh. "Does this visitor have a name?"

"Mr. Gunning, my lord."

*Ford.* He wouldn't come to Blake's home without a good reason. Especially not in the middle of the night. Blake turned and threw one last glance toward his sleeping wife before shutting the door with a soft click and walking to meet his friend.

He found Ford pacing the hall. He looked up when he heard Blake's steps and frowned at him.

"Finally, I thought you were never coming out."

"Some of us sleep, Ford," Blake answered begrudgingly.

"Does this include you?" Ford raised his brow. "Because I could have sworn you look like you haven't slept in weeks."

"Well, tonight was the first time in a while when I was enjoying my slumber." Blake raked a hand through his hair. "But it seems like I shan't get to rest on this earth. So you might as well get to the point."

"Hades."

Blake raised a brow.

"One of my men managed to secure an audience with the man. Don't ask how. It is unheard of for him to ever arrange an audience with anyone. He finds you; you never find him. However, since this has happened, we can't delay. We need to get to his club before dawn. Or he'll be gone, and we shan't have another chance to speak to him."

Blake rang the servants' bell, and Crane appeared at his elbow. "Prepare the carriage with all haste." He raised a brow at Ford. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

Ford scratched his jaw and looked Blake up and down. "You might want to wear



something less conspicuous.”

Blake looked down at himself and raised a brow. “You don’t think Hades will appreciate my manly physique?”

“Not particularly, no,” Ford said dryly.

Blake huffed a breath and went to put on some clothes.

He paused near Annalise’s bedchamber, his hand hovering over the door handle. He wanted to walk to her, place a soft kiss on her forehead, and watch her sleep, just for a little while. But he didn’t want to risk waking her. She needed her rest.

Besides, he would see her soon enough. So he shuffled past her room and got ready for the long night ahead.

\* \* \*

Several minutes later, washed, shaved, and appropriately dressed by his valet, Blake was in his carriage with Ford. They stopped in front of a dark establishment with a black iron door.

Hades hell was an exclusive membership club, and it wasn’t easy to get in. The place didn’t look like much from the outside, but the inside was a different matter altogether.

Blake rapped on the door, and a moment later, they were let inside.

This was the first time Blake had come into the Hades hell after his return. The place seemed unchanged. It was filled to the brim with gentlemen drinking alcohol, flirting with the wenches of the house, and gambling. This was just a facade. Blake knew that a lot more precarious things were going on behind the scenes of the gaming hell. It was a brothel, a facade for the smuggling operation, and more things Blake didn’t even know about.

Two burly men appeared in front of them. Blake paused, his hair standing on end.

One of the men tipped his head. “This way,” he said and led Blake and Ford through the main floor. The second man followed in their wake.

Nobody paid them any heed. The men were too busy gambling or enjoying the teasing with the house wenches.

The hell walls were decorated with disturbing scenes from *Dante’s Inferno*. The entire scenes of people rotting and being eaten alive should not have an enticing effect on the customers, but the dark interior, the alcohol, and the company had people staying there for days without checking their pocket watches. Blake had spent many a night in this place, too.

They reached the side door and stepped into the private halls.

The private halls weren't as private as the name implied. Anybody could get in there for the right price. It was an exclusive bawdy house. The wenches were all young and beautiful, and they were willing to do anything for a price. Stories were told of the things that went in there. Stories so coarse they were unbelievable. They said, for an extra price, one could watch the proceedings in these rooms.

Blake always thought it repulsive to see another man being pleased by a whore. But since the service existed, there must be people willing to pay for it. Instead of stepping onto the staircase leading to the private rooms, however, their guide turned left, pressed something on the wall, and it opened up right in front of them.

Blake and Ford exchanged curious glances.

The guide entered, took out a torch, and beckoned for them to follow.

"Are you planning to torture us here?" Blake said, trying to pass it off as a jest, while his palms perspired and his hands started to tremble.

Their guards just exchanged a glance, and Blake's stomach tied in knots. He fisted both hands by his sides to stop involuntary shaking. The dark corridor, the tight space, even the dank scent brought on unpleasant memories. They were going down the stairs, into the dungeon. The thought brought a sharp pain to his temples.

He would rather not be here. The memory of Annalise, warm and rosy-cheeked on the bed, beckoned him to run away and return home. At least this time, he wasn't alone. Ford had stationed a few of his men outside, and he wasn't one to shy away from the fight, either.

Besides, Blake had no choice but to meet with Hades. Even if he was not involved with Blake's disappearance, he was a powerful man. He walked the line between the mighty aristocrats and the lowest of the thugs. He knew a lot more than either Ford or Blake ever would.

They turned again into a narrower passage. Cold sweat broke out on Blake's face and neck. The heels of their boots echoed through the narrow hall, and a sense of foreboding assailed Blake. This was all too familiar, too unsettling. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

"Here we are." The guards stopped by one of the doors and opened the heavy lock. They stepped in and lit the torches hanging by either side of the door. A shadow shifted in the room, drawing Blake's eyes toward a tiny window in the corner. Light flickered, and Blake thought he saw a man in the far corner, and his hair stood on end. He jumped as he heard the

loud dragging sound.

“What?” Ford turned to him and frowned. He was holding on to the back of the chair he had just moved with a loud scrape.

“Nothing, it’s... nothing.” Blake returned his gaze to the far corner of the room, but there was nothing there. It was just his imagination.

This room—this dungeon—looked just like the one he was imprisoned in. Could it be that he was brought here?

“Wait here,” one of the guards said and left the room. The other one stood at the threshold, his arms crossed on his chest, his features inscrutable.

Blake dragged another chair and sat beside Ford. They didn’t talk. Ford was lost in his thoughts, and Blake concentrated on regulating his breathing.

The door opened a few minutes later, and in entered a tall, dark man. So tall, in fact, that he had to stoop to enter. His shoulders were as wide as the doorframe, his face an inscrutable mask. Or at least it seemed so until he turned facing the light and Blake saw a hideous white scar adorning the right side of his face. It was wide and ran from his brow, down his cheek, and slashed across his lips, finishing somewhere on his chin. The scar also pulled at his upper lip, making it look as if he sneered. Both Blake and Ford shot up from their seats.

“So,” he said in a rich, gravelly voice. “To what do I owe the pleasure of meeting you here, *my lord?*”

The title was said more in mockery than anything else. Now that Blake had regained his wits, he could make one conclusion certain. He had never met Hades in his life. He’d never be able to mistake him for anyone else. He’d been in his gambling hell, sure, but as far as he knew, Hades rarely frequented the floors of his establishments. He liked to observe the goings-on from his balcony upstairs, and the shadow he threw onto the floor was usually enough for his customers and workers alike to behave.

“Actually,” Ford said as he moved closer to the man, seemingly unintimidated by his size or menacing mien. “We hoped you’d be able to help us.” He stood close to Hades, almost toe to toe, and had to crane his neck to look at the hell owner’s face.

“Then you’ve made your trip in vain,” Hades answered slowly. “I don’t do favors. And I most certainly do not help people.”

Blake raised his brow. What an interesting statement.

“You might want to make an exception. I wager this would be of interest to you.” A pause. Hades didn’t seem like a patient person. Nevertheless, he barely moved a hair waiting for

Ford to speak again. "We are looking for any information regarding the group of criminals called the Shadows," Ford finally said.

"Isn't everybody?" Hades answered evenly.

"Are they?" Ford cocked his head to the side. "I've heard rumors that they've been mucking up your business," he said carefully.

"Rumors." Hades scoffed. "Is that what you base all of your investigations on? Rumors?"

"As opposed to what? Visions?" Hades stiffened at that, and Blake glanced at his friend curiously. What the devil was he talking about? What kind of visions? Ford shrugged. "People talk."

"Until they don't have tongues, they do," Hades said darkly. "I don't know anything about the Shadows. Nobody does. Could be a group of criminals, or could be just one mad soul running around at night with a sword and a dagger, running down anybody who got in his way."

"So, you've never seen one yourself?" Ford asked.

"Nobody's seen one. That's why those 'rumors' are so unreliable. If nobody saw them, if they—or he—is so elusive, then where'd the rumors come from?" Hades shrugged.

"We have a reason to believe that whoever is looking for these Shadows might be the people who kept Lord Payne prisoner. And since you admit your interest in the group, you are one of our suspects."

Hades' cold gaze settled on Payne, making his skin crawl. "Despite what people think of me, I am not a cold-blooded murderer," he finally said.

"Aren't you?" Blake raised a brow.

"And I do not torture people for information. I have other, more subtle ways of getting what I need."

"Like blackmail, extortion?" Ford interjected, but Hades ignored him.

"Unlike the people you are looking for, I do not keep toffs imprisoned either. I am not a fool. It's a hanging offense, not to mention it would anger my most loyal clientele. But if I did seize a toff, I would sure as hell not let him get away."

"Then why did you invite us here?" Blake said. "If you don't believe in either the Shadows or rumors about them, and if you had nothing to do with my capture, then why talk to us at all?"

Hades turned his opaque eyes on Blake. "Because," he said slowly. "Your friend, the thief-taker, and his men are snooping around my hell, and I don't like it. Because people don't feel

safe where thief-takers show up. This place is a haven.”

Blake scoffed and received a burning gaze from Hades.

“This place is a safe haven for people to enjoy sin. This is no place for investigations and no place for thief-takers. Not unless they get themselves a drink and a whore. If people believe that we are responsible for your capture, they will stop coming here. If they believe thief-takers are snooping around, they will be wary of trusting us with their secrets. This is bad for business. And believe it or not, we are not in the business of torturing and killing people. We need people, especially entitled toffs like you. We need your money.”

Blake felt himself bristle. He hadn’t come here to be insulted and sneered at. This was a waste of time. Even if he knew anything, Hades wasn’t about to divulge the information. Ford patted him on the shoulder as if he felt Blake’s darkening mood.

“All right. Let’s assume for a moment that we believe you didn’t send your goons to seize and torture Lord Payne. But he was taken from outside your club. And there is a high probability that it was one or several of your people. Perhaps not per your instruction but acting out of their own accord.”

“My men are criminals. I took them off the streets, cleaned them up, and put them to work. I am not responsible for everything they do outside of those working hours.” Hades turned his curious gaze to Blake. “Besides, if my men did this, you wouldn’t be standing upright before me. I see you’re alive and well. How did you manage that?” His voice turned silky, raising hackles on Blake’s arms, so unpleasant it was like a snake’s hiss.

His words, however, conjured the dark images in his mind. The images of beatings he had endured and things he had to do to survive. Blake pushed the memories down. Now was not the time to dive into his thoughts and nasty recollections.

“I got lucky,” he said simply.

“Indeed.” Hades narrowed his eyes on him, then turned his attention back to Ford. “Keeping an aristocrat imprisoned is a hanging offense. So is harboring a fiend who did it. So if any of my men had anything to do with this, rest assured, justice will be served.”

“Somehow, when you say justice, I doubt you mean justice,” Ford said.

Hades gave a careless shrug. “Vengeance then.”

“Good. Then we understand each other?” Ford said, and Blake frowned at him. Was that it?

“Indeed,” Hades answered and snapped his fingers. One of his men immediately opened the door and looked at Blake inquiringly.

Blake reached inside his pocket and took out his sketches. "These are the rough sketches of the people I remember."

Hades took the paper and stared at the unfinished drawings. "They are missing some integral body parts. Like eyes and noses."

"Perhaps you would recognize the silhouette or..."

Hades handed the sketches back. "I hope to never see you here again, Payne."

Blake looked at Ford, who gestured for him to step outside. Blake fought to conceal his irritation and left the room.

"Well, that was an incredible waste of time," Blake said with a sigh as they exited the hell.

"Not necessarily," Ford said and hurried behind the building. He let out three short whistles, and three men appeared before him.

"Jamison," he addressed one of his men. "How about you get yourself a drink and a whore and get as close to Hades' private chambers as you can. Pay close attention to what is going on inside. The rest of you watch the building closely. If you see any suspicious activity, send one of the boys with a missive."

With nods, the three men scattered in different directions.

Ford turned back to Blake. "We've made certain Hades knows that we shan't stop until we find the culprits. He knows that if his men turn out to be the ones responsible, he and his business would suffer greatly; therefore, he'll do anything in his power to find them himself and punish them. Besides, I did not like how he looked at your sketches; I think he recognized the men despite his flippancy. If I am right and he starts looking for these men today, they might want to flee. If he does it silently, he will execute them before we have a chance to find out who is behind your disappearance. So my men will hold the watch, and you can sleep soundly for now."

Blake raised his brow, and Ford gave him a wink. "It's not my first day on the job, Blake. And as much as I hate sharing bread with Hades, he comes in handy in situations like this."

Blake thought a while about his words. "You'd rather he was the one who hung from the rope, wouldn't you?"

"Cutting off the snake's head seems to be the best approach, yes. He holds too much power in London. I know, just like everybody else, that he has some dark dungeons of his own. But he is too well connected and protected by both criminals and lords alike. It's not as easy as catching him in a crime and hanging him. He'd be too difficult to prosecute. Until that day comes..." Ford shrugged.

"Bake bread and make merry," Blake finished for his friend.

"Exactly." Ford nodded and gestured for him to proceed toward the carriage.

## Chapter 17



**I**t was the day of the grand ball, and Annalise was a nervous wreck. She hadn't seen Blake for two days. After the tender night she'd spent in his arms, the night he'd promised to be there when she woke up, instead, she awakened alone, and Blake had disappeared for the next two days.

Annalise knew that he'd occasionally been in the house. The door to his study was shut, and food was sometimes delivered there, but she hadn't managed to catch him, and he hadn't spent nights at home either.

What had happened that night that he just disappeared like that? Was it just because of her courses? Annalise knew, deep down, that the reason must have been more complex than that, but after the experience she went through for the first months of their marriage, she didn't feel confident about anything. And this seemed too familiar. After a few weeks of courting, he started acting exactly the way he had during their marriage.

She only prayed that he'd actually show up to their ball.

It was the first ball she'd hosted as the Countess of Payne. She'd hosted a couple of dinners and a musical the year before but never a ball. And this was the first official event in the Payne house since Blake's return, so they were expecting lots of guests.

Annalise was nervous and anxious about the ball, especially since she didn't have anyone to rely on. And during this stressful time for her, Blake was nowhere to be found. Annalise sent the housekeeper to find him and remind him that the ball was in an hour.

She really should be the one to find him, but she was afraid she would break down if she was unsuccessful. If he didn't come to fetch her before the guests started arriving, she would have to host their first ball alone.

Ruth made an intricate coiffure and let a few golden ringlets loose at the front and back of her head. She dressed her in a deep coral gown, fastened the heavy ruby necklace Blake bought her around her neck and handed her the silk gloves.

Annalise gave one more twirl before the mirror and went to look out the window. Soon,



the guests would arrive, and the ball would begin. Annalise picked on the tips of her gloves.

“Breathtaking.” Blake’s hoarse voice startled her, and Annalise jumped before whirling on him. Blake gave her an apologetic smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” He walked further into the room.

“I didn’t hear the door open.” Annalise’s voice was breathless; her heart beat incessantly against her chest.

“I should have knocked; I just... couldn’t wait another moment to see you.”

Annalise expelled a breath in relief. *You came*. She didn’t realize fully how frightened she was that Blake might let her down again.

Blake made a few long strides, and in a moment, he was right in front of her, holding her gloved hands in his. “Is everything all right?” he asked. “You seem—”

“Nervous,” Annalise said with a shaky laugh. “I thought... I was afraid... I haven’t seen you for two days.”

Blake brushed a lock of hair away from her face. “I am sorry, darling. I had a few things to take care of, but I shall be with you every step of the way.”

Annalise closed her eyes. Their problems could wait. She would question Blake about what kept him from her later. She’d have plenty of time to worry about their future after the ball. For now, she bathed in the warmth of his reassurance. This was all she ever needed to hear. That he would be there beside her. Always.

Blake placed a soft, warm kiss on her forehead, and Annalise sighed.

“Shall we?” Blake offered his arm, and Annalise took it with a smile.

\* \* \*

Blake stood with Annalise in the receiving line for what seemed like forever. Ever since the visit to the Hades hell, Blake had felt twitchy and on edge. He’d come back from the outing shaking and covered in a cold sweat. Ford had told him he should be able to sleep easier after their visit to the gambling hell, but that wasn’t the case.

After having a long, warm bath, he’d locked himself in the study, fighting to keep the old memories at bay. He reached for the bottle of brandy once or twice but hadn’t been able to pick it up. He’d promised himself to be better for Annalise. He’d promise himself to never have an alcoholic drink again. She hated the smell of alcohol on him, but most importantly,

he loathed the man he turned into when he was foxed. Not a man, a beast. So he kept himself from drinking, but that meant his thoughts and memories were driving him insane.

Blake couldn't come to Annalise in this state of mind. He would have terrified her with his appearance. He wanted nothing more but to spend nights in her arms. But he was tense and irritable, and he never wanted Annalise to see him this way.

When it became obvious that the memories plaguing him would not disappear, he decided to do something useful. So he left the house and followed a lead of his own.

He went to the clubs and social events, looking for Jarvis. He wanted to see if any message would be delivered to him or if he'd act strange in any way. The first night they'd spent together, nothing seemed out of place, but on the second night, Jarvis had left the company during the night, disappearing without so much as a word.

And this morning, Blake had received a note from Ford, saying that something had happened in Hades hell. A fight broke out, and a few men defected, nearly setting the place on fire. It might have been unrelated, or this might have been the result of Hades recognizing one of the sketches and trying to punish his men for disobedience.

Two gentlemen came up to the greeting line, laughing. Blake looked up and saw Jarvis and their mutual friend, the one they'd spent the previous nights in the clubs with.

"Lord St. John, Lord Bradshaw, welcome." Annalise curtsied with a smile.

"Jarvis, Bradshaw." Blake sketched a bow.

The men bowed over Annalise's hand before turning toward Blake.

"It's so good to see you back in the clubs. I assume we are going to see you there more frequently now?" Bradshaw asked.

Annalise's hand tensed on Blake's arm.

"Perhaps," Blake gritted out.

He watched Jarvis intently. The man didn't look out of sorts. He seemed collected and well-groomed.

"We still haven't heard the story about where you have been hiding," Bradshaw continued relentlessly.

Blake knew he'd have to answer the incessant questioning, but after getting hit by reminders during their visit to Hades, he wasn't in the mood, and there were other things on his mind.

"I shall regale you with all the details later," Blake answered swiftly. "And perhaps Jarvis can tell us where he disappeared to last night."

Jarvis raised a brow but otherwise didn't miss a beat. "I got myself a nice, warm wench," he replied with a wink.

"Is that also what you did when you disappeared?" Bradshaw turned to Blake.

Annalise stilled beside him, and Blake cursed Bradshaw for his thoughtless words. This was not the time for questioning Jarvis, however. Neither could he quench Bradshaw's curiosity. That would have to wait. "Not at all," he answered with a pleasant smile. "I shall tell you all, gentlemen, as soon as I am done with the receiving line. For now, I have a duty as a host."

"Oh, of course, of course. Did not mean to keep you from your duties." Bradshaw sketched a theatrical bow, and both he and Jarvis disappeared into the throng of guests.

"I don't think I ever liked that man," Blake grumbled under his breath.

When they were finally done with the receiving line, Annalise disengaged from him and went on to chat with the guests, while Blake went to the refreshments table and eyed the bottles of wine. He poured himself a glass of punch instead. He sipped it, pretending it was wine, pretending it had the same soothing effect on his mind.

He gazed across the ballroom at his wife, who fluttered like a butterfly from one cluster of matrons to another, greeting them with a sunny smile on her face. He had to join her. It was not only the polite thing to do—or what he was supposed to do both as a host and a man who'd returned from a long absence—it was something he wanted to do. To be by his wife's side at all times was his fervent wish. She drew him to her, and he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her. But he couldn't do it. Not at the moment.

His energies were so low, his mood so foul, he would bark at a shriveled old lady the moment she hinted at his disappearance. He was a curiosity everyone wanted to learn about. They whispered about him behind their fans. And they needed his story to feed the gossip. There was nothing wrong with that. That was how their society lived and functioned.

Only they had no earthly idea about the horrors Blake had gone through, or they wouldn't be asking. And willingly throwing himself into the pit of his dark memories wasn't something Blake looked forward to doing.

"Are you all right?" Jarvis appeared at his elbow.

Blake choked on his punch and coughed into his fist. Jarvis clapped him good-naturedly on the back.

"Didn't mean to startle you. Apologies," he said with a grin.

Blake took out the handkerchief and wiped at his teary eyes. "That's all right. I was lost in

thought. Didn't see you approaching."

"I am just here to warn you that gentlemen are determined to get the account of your disappearance out of you," he said sotto voce. "I hope you have a story prepared."

Blake took another sip of his drink and gave a slight nod.

True to Jarvis's word, soon Blake was surrounded by a crowd of gentlemen, all eager to finally hear the story of Blake's whereabouts for the past year and a half. Blake's panicked gaze landed on Annalise.

She must have felt his turmoil because she turned to him at that same moment and gave him a reassuring smile. Blake took a breath. For a moment, everything disappeared: the crowd, the noise, the ballroom. All he could see was Annalise. All he could hear was his heartbeat slowing down, steadying under the calming gaze of his wife. He could do it. He could beat his anxiety and get through this day with her by his side. With her, he could get through anything.

Blake concentrated on Annalise's face, imagining their future. Many more balls like these, many more nights in bed with her. If he had a choice, he'd stalk right through the crowd, pick her up, and carry her to the first solitary room. He'd have her against the door, or table, or any furniture in sight. Hell, he'd settle for cuddling her close to him or even just holding her hand at that moment. He needed her reassuring warmth beside him.

But he couldn't have that. At least, not yet. They'd have many quiet evenings and passionate nights ahead of them once he found the people behind his disappearance, once some other scandal stole the attention of gossips.

All he needed to do was weave an articulate story for the benefit of irksome lords—a lie—so they'd leave him alone and never ask about his experiences again.

So he winked at his wife and turned back to the men around him.

"It's a long story, gentlemen, and not for the ears of gentle ladies. So shall we adjourn to the card room?"

\* \* \*

The incessant racket of laughter came from the card room ever since Blake had disappeared there with a throng of gentlemen. Annalise couldn't help but cast a glance over her shoulder at the room. Blake had led the lords there under the pretense of telling them the story of

where he'd been for the past year and a half. But unless he'd spent that time traveling with court jesters and harlequins, the laughter coming from the room seemed out of place.

After speaking with some of the matrons and making sure that the ball was proceeding accordingly, she walked toward the card room.

Another peal of laughter ripped through the curtain hangers separating the card room from the ballroom. Annalise entered and hovered at the threshold.

"And did the young maiden thank you for your efforts?" one of the men asked suggestively.

"I wouldn't have saved her otherwise," Blake said with a grin.

"Oh, poor maidens across the sea. How shall they fare without their mighty protector now?" an old lord shouted with a drunken slur.

"Now we all want to roam the seas instead of being stuck with our old wives in musty ballrooms," another one chimed in.

Annalise put her hand to her abdomen, feeling ill. She turned to leave, but with the corner of her eye, she caught Blake noticing her.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I believe my wife needs a rescue too."

He tipped his hat and walked out of the room. Annalise hurried her steps, trying to get away from her husband, but he caught up with her and took her by her arm.

"Is anything amiss?"

"Amiss?" Annalise whirled on him. "Is any of it true?"

"What?" Blake's eyes ran nervously around the room, his breathing shallow.

"Your outrageous stories about saving maidens and roaming the seas? Is that truly where you were all this time?"

"Let us discuss this in another place. Somewhere far from here." Blake took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He took a deep breath before steering Annalise away from the ballroom.

"Where are we going?" Annalise asked worriedly.

"Somewhere private."

They made a few steps down the dimly lit corridor before Blake turned and opened the door to his study. He held it open for Annalise, so she entered. She couldn't be out of the ballroom for too long. The disappearance of the hostess would be commented upon. But she was much more interested in what Blake had to say.

Instead of speaking, Blake took her by the waist, whirled her around, and trapped her

with his body against the door. The next moment, his lips were on her, kissing, devouring. Annalise sagged against his body for a moment before she returned to her senses and shoved him in the chest.

Blake took a step back and looked at her curiously.

"Blake, this is not why we are here."

"Darling, I don't want to talk. I've been talking for two hours trying to appease the lords and making certain there won't be any scandal."

"This was your way of ensuring no scandal would happen? Humiliating me?"

Blake raked a hand through his hair. "Humiliating? Darling, those lords do not care about any of that. They just needed an entertaining story. Besides, what would you have me say? The truth?" he asked irritably.

"I don't even know what this truth is!" Annalise let out a huff of breath. "And no, I do not wish you told them the truth, but I wish you told it to me."

"The truth is not for your ears."

"Oh, for the love of God, if I hear you say that one more time!" Annalise was so enraged she was ready to stomp her foot.

Instead, she took a deep breath and walked past him, deeper into the study. She lit the candle on the desk and perched herself on the corner. "I want to know the truth. No matter what it is. No matter how ugly."

"I can't do that."

"Then I can't do *this*." Annalise waved her hand between them. "I can't pretend like everything is all right in this marriage anymore. If you can't trust me, then there is no point in us even feigning a relationship."

Blake's head shot up. "I do trust you."

"Do you? Because ever since you've come back, you haven't shared anything of worth with me. Is this how you trust me?" She looked away and noticed the leather journal. The same one with the list of suspects of his disappearance. She took it and held it up in her hand. "Is this how you trust me?" she repeated.

Blake raked his hand through his hair. "This is too complicated. And it has nothing to do with trust."

"It has everything to do with trust, Blake. You say that you trust me with your life. But have you given me any reason to trust *you*?"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"I am talking about the promises you don't keep. Y-you promise to be there for me forever, but you can't even be bothered to appear by my bed in the morning after we spend the night! You say that it's too difficult for you to tell me where you spent a year and a half of your life, but how about the last two days?"

"Pardon?"

Annalise let out a scoff. "That night, when you held me in your arms, you promised me you'd be there in the morning. Instead, you disappeared for days."

"I had—Blast it, Annalise! I had business to attend to. I had issues to take care of. I was captured by bandits and went through hell as a result, and I need to find the people responsible!"

"And I am not saying you don't have things to worry about. I just wish you'd share them with me. How am I to guess what you are up to all day? You keep saying no past, but I cannot ignore the past when the present is following the same pattern. I am sorry, but I cannot trust you. And without trust, what is left?"

Blake swallowed. "What about love?"

Annalise took a few deep breaths. "I do not think love is enough anymore."

Blake blinked. "Just like that, you are willing to discard everything that happened between us in the past month because of the last two days?"

"No, Blake. Not just two days. Two years. The past does exist, no matter how much you try to pretend it doesn't. You went back to being the sweet and considerate Blake for one minute, and you expect me to be the same gullible and naïve, starry-eyed Annalise. Well, she's not here anymore. I've changed. I know you went through a lot after your disappearance, but so have I. And shouldn't we at least try to share our experiences with each other?"

"You don't want to know the details."

"How in the world do you know what I want?" Annalise cried in desperation. "You have this twisted idea that you know what's best for me, and you're wrong. You've always been wrong. And the sad part is you can't even see that. Getting back to what things were like before our marriage is not going to help. Because that courtship was just an illusion. It was comprised of-of these few magical moments that led me to believe I was in love with you when all along I never knew who you really were." She paused and looked away. "I still don't."

Blake, who stood frozen, watching her all this time with a wide-eyed stare, expelled a frustrated breath. "Yes, you are right. I've failed in our relationship. I failed you. Twice in as many years. I want to be the husband you deserve, but for the life of me, I don't know what

that is. I wish you could just tell me what to do.” He turned to her then, such vulnerability in his eyes that her heart squeezed.

“I already did,” she said softly. “You just don’t seem to be listening.”

Blake raked his hands through his locks. “I want you, Annalise. I need you. I love you. And I’ll do whatever you ask of me.”

Annalise swallowed. Blake hadn’t said he loved her since the day he proposed. It was the first and the last time he ever said that to her. Before now.

“I see that you need me,” she said. “I do. But need is selfish. You’re asking everything of me without offering anything in return, and this is not love. Because love is never selfish.”

“No? Then how come you are the one being selfish now? How come you’re refusing to help me when I ask you to?”

“Because love is not destructive, either. And whatever this is between us, it is killing me. I cannot risk falling into the same trap twice. I’ve loved you before, and it brought me nothing but misery. I’d rather not go through that again.”

“So that’s it then? You are not even going to try?”

“I *was* trying. I was. I stayed with you during the past month, didn’t I? I went to balls and soirees and the theater with you. I played the perfect wife. I granted you access to my bedroom. I did everything you’ve asked of me.”

“And it’s been perfect, hasn’t it?”

“It has been perfect. A perfect courtship,” she said quietly. “But courtship was never our problem. Our problems started with our marriage. And as the time has shown, our marriage hasn’t changed either.”

“I changed.”

“Because of your disappearance. But what happens when your guilt and your trauma wears off? What happens when you get bored of me again? The mistrust, the secrecy is still all there at the core of our relationship. Which means once this period of courtship is over, we shall go back to the marriage we’ve had, and I can’t do that anymore. And I can’t expect you to get captured for two years every time to change your mind again.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that another two months, or two years, won’t change anything. The girl who was in love with you is gone. And the man she was in love with never existed.”

“You’ve made up your mind, then. Is that it? You don’t want to wait until the end of our bargain. You just want to leave.”



"Yes, Blake. You and I seem to want different things. You want adventure and courtship. And I... I wanted a family, someone to rely on... a babe."

"A babe?" He scoffed. "So letting me into your bed wasn't even about us, or passion. It was about a babe? Well, then I am glad you didn't get it," he spat.

Annalise's mouth slacked open. Her eyes burned, and she was short of breath. Did he really say that?

"Are you?" She paused and took a deep breath. "Well, then, you'll also be glad to know that I *was* with child. Do you remember our wedding night? The night you came in foxed and took me without gentleness? Well, it resulted in a babe. Or rather it didn't." Annalise's voice turned hoarse, and tears streamed down her face. Blake stood frozen in place, his face a grimace of horror. "So you can rejoice in that too."

"Annalise." Blake made a step closer, but Annalise shook her head, stepping away.

"Because the moment I was notified of your death, I lost the babe. I lost everything that night. You, my social position, my place in the world, and more importantly, our babe. So, yes, you took everything from me without giving anything back. And I don't think I have anything left to give."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Blake's voice was hoarse.

"You didn't want to know. Didn't you say no past?"

"I just meant my past, not yours."

Annalise upturned her face. "And isn't the loss of our babe your past too?" Annalise took a deep breath to regulate her heartbeat. Her face felt puffy under her fingers; her eyes were probably red.

"You should have told me."

"And you should have asked. About anything. You knew that I spent over a year without you. Why did you never ask how that time was for me? Because it wasn't pleasant. You thought I was in love with Kensington? Well, no. But he found out about the babe and offered me the protection of his name. When I lost the babe, he offered me his title. What did you ever offer me but misery?" She took off her necklace and placed it on the table. "These gifts, the flowers, and the courtship mean nothing if there's no marriage beyond. Your words mean nothing if there's no action to prove their worth."

Blake took a step toward her, but she stood and walked to stand behind the desk, as far away from him as she could.

Blake raked his hand through his hair. "I shall not let you go this easily. If you want a

child, then you'll have one. Until you do, you'll stay by my side."

He stood motionless for what seemed like forever. Annalise didn't dare look at him. She knew he wouldn't let her leave easily; she knew he wouldn't listen to her concerns. He hadn't changed. Just as she thought. At least not where it mattered.

## Chapter 18



Blake stood in the ballroom sipping punch, watching as happy couples danced around the dancefloor. Just a few minutes ago, he had been building dreams of always having Annalise on his arm, of hosting events such as this every year with her by his side.

Now he knew he wouldn't have that. He'd ruined it all.

She had lost their babe. And he wasn't there when it happened. Hell, he hadn't even been curious enough to ask. Surely he knew where babes came from. He'd just tried to push down the memories of their wedding night and move on. He was running from the past and not only his own, he realized, but theirs too. Because as lucky as he'd been to win Annalise's heart, he was the arse who'd smashed it instead of keeping it safe.

*I guess I owe Kensington gratitude, after all.* He snorted.

"The wine not to your liking, my lord?"

Blake turned to the owner of the voice only to see Annalise's friend, Lady Lavinia, standing by his side but staring ahead, watching the couples dance.

"It isn't wine, my lady." He inclined his head. "Perhaps that's the issue."

"I find the punch quite pleasing," she said.

Blake just grunted in answer.

"I apologize in advance for overstepping my bounds, but I came to offer you a piece of advice."

Blake turned and studied her curiously. "What advice could you possibly offer me?"

"To treat your wife with more care."

"With all due respect, Lady Lavinia, the relationship between me and my wife is none of your concern."

"But it is," she said firmly.

"I don't see how."

"I am her childhood friend. Every sleepless night Annalise spent waiting for you, every day she cried because of you, I was there to pick up the pieces of her shattered soul and

comfort her.”

“That was before.”

“Then what was tonight?”

Blake fisted his hands at his sides.

“You keep saying you’ve changed, and yet Annalise is crying in another room because of you. Again. You say you are not selfish anymore, and yet you put your ego ahead of her feelings, her wants, once again. You say you want her to be happy, and yet, she is miserable. I am afraid your actions speak volumes higher than your words.”

Blake stared ahead. “I am prepared to do anything to make her happy.”

“Anything?” she asked, with a strange lilt to her voice. “Then prove it. For once, put her wants ahead of your own.” Lady Lavinia took a sip of her drink and performed a perfect curtsy. “My Lord.”

She walked away, but the weight of her words would forever stay with Blake.

*You say you want her to be happy, and yet, she is miserable. I am afraid your actions speak volumes higher than your words.* The words rang in his mind. Hadn’t Annalise said something similar?

What a fucking hypocrite he was. And a daft one at that. He turned on his heel and stalked toward the exit. He needed to see his wife.

\* \* \*

Blake entered the shadowy study. Annalise sat at the desk, her gaze distant. Her golden locks were elaborately gathered on her head, but he’d rather see them loose. Just one more time.

He peered into her face, trying to remember every line of her lovely features. She raised her head. Her beautiful blue eyes stared back at him, so vulnerable and full of hurt. Her rosy lips were pursed sternly.

Blake stood staring at Annalise, etching her likeness into his mind. They should have made a portrait together upon his return. Hell, just her portrait would do. He’d hang it on his bedroom ceiling to stare into her eyes every night.

If he didn’t let her go now, she would never trust him again. If he did, there was no guarantee she’d ever return.

*Love is never selfish*, she’d said just a few minutes ago. Had he always been this selfish? Had

he ever considered what she wanted, truly?

Blake scrubbed his face with his hands. If he let her go now, he might never see her again. But if that was what she needed to be happy, then he would do it.

"I am releasing you from our deal," he said hoarsely. "You can leave if that's what you want."

Annalise's eyes widened for a moment, and her lips parted. She didn't expect him to comply, he realized.

"I shall put a large sum of money into your separate account. You will be free to do as you like." He took a deep breath. "I shall ask for the carriage to be prepared for you when you're ready, but I insist on sending at least four footmen with you for your safety. When would you like to leave?"

"Come morning." Annalise's voice was quiet but firm.

"The ball is going to last until morning. Perhaps you'd want to rest—"

"I want to leave in the morning, Blake."

Blake took a deep breath and nodded. "If that's what you want. The carriage will be ready in the morn."

There was a long pause while Blake stood still, devouring her form, memorizing every line of her face. He wished he could bottle up and keep her voice too. He would play it every night before sleep. She loved to play the pianoforte, but her voice was the sweetest music for his ears.

Annalise sat there simply watching him, too. Was she also trying to memorize him, or was she waiting for something?

Finally, Annalise licked her lips and said, "Thank you."

Then she stood, walked past him, and left the room.

# The Wedding Day



*Autumn 1739*

Lavinia stood in front of Annalise, looking at her with unconcealed awe.

“You are breathtakingly gorgeous,” she said.

“Thank you, dear. And incredibly happy. I am so lucky, Lavinia, to find the gentleman I have been dreaming of.”

Lavinia clapped her hands in delight. “I am so happy for you.”

“It shall happen to you too.” Annalise smiled. She perched herself on the bed and petted the coverlet next to her. “Come, sit for a moment.”

As Lavinia did, Annalise took a small pouch out of her pocket. “I got this for him as a gift,” she said with a smile and extended the pouch to Lavinia.

Lavinia peeked inside and fished out a silver locket. She opened it and beheld Annalise’s miniature. “It’s beautiful.”

“I spent hours sitting for that.” Annalise took the gift back and store it in her pocket. “I hope he likes it.”

“He will love it. Now he will always have you by his side.”

Annalise looked up. “Do you remember that night at our house many summers ago? You came to my garret as you always did after our bedtime, and we made a wish under a full moon?”

“We wrote down our perfect men and burned those wishes over the candle,” Lavinia said.

Annalise giggled. “Yes.”

“Is Lord Moore that gentleman you wished for?”

“Yes. I think he truly is.” Annalise wiped her eyes. “Oh, look at me, I am tearing up!”

Lavinia handed her a handkerchief and wiped her own eyes.

“Your wish will also come true. I am certain of it.”

Lavinia gave her a lopsided smile. “I wished for Dane, if you remember. I do not think I am going to get him. Besides, it was just a childish infatuation. It shall pass.”

The door opened then, and Annalise's mother entered.

"Lavinia, be a dear and leave me and my daughter alone. There are some things I need to tell her of the wedding night."

Lavinia pursed her lips in compressed laughter, and Annalise mirrored the action. They were both ignorant of matters concerning the marital bed and both curious to find out what it entailed.

As Lavinia left the room, Annalise's mother entered and perched herself on the bed, where Lavinia sat just a moment ago.

"I suppose it is time for me to tell you the truth about what's awaiting you in married life. You've been stubborn, scandalously so, in choosing your husband, and we've had no choice but to honor your wish lest you humiliate us with an elopement. You haven't listened to me or your father thus far, but I hope you will listen now."

Annalise raised her brow. This was most ominous for the beginning of a lecture about married life.

"Gentlemen like Lord Moore—young, soon to be titled, energetic—they are never faithful to their wives. They are persistent in using their right to your marriage bed, and when they tire of you, they move on to their mistresses."

"That won't happen to me," Annalise said with certainty.

"So naïve, my dear. We wanted to marry you to patient, quiet Norfolk, but you rebelled. Lord Moore's scandalous pursuits are talked about throughout the high society. He drinks, he gambles, he chases after every light skirt in the vicinity, just like his father used to do. He is young and strong, so he will be demanding of you."

"Blake is strong, you are right, yet he's gentle. He is nothing like you describe. And he is nothing like his father. We shall be happy together. You will soon see it for yourself."

Her mother smiled. "They are all gentle until the wedding day. Then they either turn into beasts or ignore you for the rest of your life. I suppose the latter is the better of the two." She shrugged. "But do not worry, dear; you will soon see it for yourself."

## Chapter 19



Annalise wiped a stray tear off her face and looked out the window. The London scenery changed to that of open fields, making Annalise feel free and suffocated at the same time. Had she thought this was how her life would turn out when she'd married Blake?

Of course not. She'd imagined she'd be forever happy with a perfect man. Who would have thought that her mother would turn out to be correct—the woman who had never hidden her own liaisons and who had never cared about Annalise.

Annalise put a hand to her abdomen, and her heart squeezed. She would never have the honor of holding her own child in her arms.

There was a rattle in the basket next to her, and Annalise slightly lifted the lid, peering inside. Glowing green eyes met hers as if begging to be let out.

"I'm sorry, Miss Gale," Annalise crooned. "I can't let you out, lest you hurt yourself."

The carriage halted abruptly, and the horses whinnied loudly. Annalise started forward and hit her head over the roof of the carriage. As the lid slid open, Miss Gale jumped out of her basket and landed on the carriage seat, her hackles raised, her spine arched up.

"It's all right, Miss Gale. It's probably just an accident," Annalise said as she picked herself off the floor.

She wasn't certain if she found her own explanation soothing. The broken axle was common enough—the roads weren't perfect—but so soon? They were barely out of London. Shots fired, and Annalise picked up Miss Gale, brought her closer to her chest, and scrambled to the back of the carriage.

What was that?

The door flew open, and a burly gentleman—no, not a gentleman, a ruffian—entered. Miss Gale hissed, trying to claw her way out of Annalise's arms. The ruffian picked up the kitten and looked at it curiously.

"Aw, what a nice kit—" Miss Gale scratched him deeply in his eye with a hiss.

"You spawn of the devil!" the thug cursed and threw her against the seat.



Miss Gale twisted in the air and landed on her side with a pained shriek.

"No!" Annalise scrambled to pick up the kitten.

As the thug wiped at his eye, Annalise had just enough time to throw Miss Gale into the basket and close the lid. At that moment, the bandit grabbed Annalise by the ankle and dragged her toward the exit.

Annalise thrashed and screamed, but it was no use. He was too strong, and there was no one to help her.

He exited the carriage and thrust her onto the ground. Annalise landed on her hands and knees, her palms scratched against the gravel, and her skirt ripped. A pair of dark, worn boots appeared before her.

"Get up," said the man in a barely comprehensible country accent.

Someone grabbed her by the arms and lifted her to a standing position. She stared at the man before her, a tall, dirty, foul-smelling man with hands like hammers, and reared back instinctively. He smiled unpleasantly, showing his yellow, crooked teeth.

"Pretty little thing, aren't you? No wonder Payne fought so hard to come back home. I'd fight like that too if I had a pretty thing like you waiting to warm my bed. Too bad he didn't leave it alone upon his return. Should've snuggled with you and let us be."

Annalise's eyes widened. These were the thugs who took Blake? What did they want with her? Nothing pleasant, she supposed.

She wanted to ask a question or say something witty in answer, but her tongue went numb.

"Back to the horses," he barked and walked away.

Annalise tried to struggle, but two thugs held her tight on either side and dragged her to the nearest horse.

"Harv, bring the rope!" one man spat, and the other man, presumably by the name of Harv, started tying her up while the other one held her hands.

"No! Let go!" Annalise yelled as she struggled to break free.

Harv grabbed her by the hair and tugged her head back. A sharp pain originated at the scalp, and her mouth fell open.

The thug looked at her mouth and lowered his head with slow deliberation. Annalise struggled in vain. She was no match for the violent, strong man. So she did the only thing she could. Just when his mouth was about to descend on her, she spat on him.

Harv reared back, letting go of her head in the process. The man holding Annalise by the

hand laughed uproariously.

“Shut your gob, Garry!” Harv wiped his face and cuffed the other man on the shoulder. The other man reciprocated, throwing some foul words into the argument.

The scuffle gave Annalise a chance to free herself. But before she managed to make a few steps, someone grabbed her by her tumbling hair and yanked hard.

Annalise ended up on her rear, back on the gravel, her scalp burning.

Her breathing was labored, and her vision blurred by either tears or sweat. But what she saw then made her heart constrict in fear. Her driver and the footmen were lying on the ground, tied up by the carriage in a pool of blood.

The thug yanked her by the hair again and dragged her to the horse. Annalise struggled in earnest, crying out for help.

“Shut her up!” their leader called from the horseback.

Harv took a dirty rag and stuffed it in her mouth before tying up her hands and throwing her onto the back of the horse.

\* \* \*

Blake sat in his study, staring at the walls. He hadn’t been able to open himself up to Annalise and share his deepest fears. Now those fears would become his reality. He’d have to live alone.

He didn’t know how he would sleep or if he would ever sleep again. But if that was the sacrifice he had to make so that Annalise was happy, so be it. He had been too selfish to know how to make her happy before. Now he was too broken to even attempt it.

The front door to the townhouse shut with a resounding bang, and the sounds of panicked voices filtered into the study. Blake whipped his head up in attention. Something was going on.

He stood and hurried toward the main hall. His heartbeat accelerated, and his breathing was coming in frantic gulps. He didn’t need to hear the explanation. He already knew. Something had happened to Annalise.

The servants stepped aside, clearing the path for Blake, and he saw the bloody, winded footman, Rogers, fall to his knees. One of the footmen he had sent to guard Annalise.

Rogers caught himself with his hands and looked at Blake, sweat falling onto the floor.

"They took her, my lord," he said between gulps of air. "They took her ladyship."

For a long moment, time went still. Sounds muted, and his vision blurred.

The image of Annalise stood before him: bound and gagged in a chair, a burly thug towering over her.

His worst nightmare.

Blake shook his head and shut his eyes briefly to dispel the vision. He brought his attention back to his townhouse. The servants were buzzing around him, fussing with the injured footman.

Blake stepped closer to Rogers, his breaths shallow. There was no time to break down crying and cursing the world. Annalise needed him.

"Where? Where did it happen? And where are the rest of the men?"

"They were injured. Worse than me. They couldn't move. The bandits took our horses. So I ran to the nearby village inn, asked for the doctor, and took the horse from their stables. The other men should be in the village by now."

"Which way did the bandits take Annalise?"

Rogers panted, his eyes closing. "Back to the city."

Blake took deep breaths. If these were the same people who captured him, of which he was certain, then they'd go back to the docks. It was only logical. They had a hideout there. A dungeon. Blake's hands perspired, and his breaths were coming out in shallow gulps.

Sweat broke out on Blake's forehead. His footman was lying exhausted at his feet. Four other servants were wounded and bleeding somewhere at a village inn. And Annalise was gone. He needed to concentrate.

Blake turned to Crane. "Find Rogers a comfortable bed. Make sure he is looked after. Send a couple of footmen to find a doctor. I need them to go to the village, find other servants, and bring them back. Alive. Ask Rogers to provide the directions."

Blake tried to regulate his breathing, his gaze running around the hall, not able to settle on one thing. *Now is not the time to lose control. Concentrate; Annalise needs me.*

"And bring me Gunning, the thief-taker. Immediately!"

Blake turned on his heel and stalked to his study. He took his musket, threw on a coat, and set out to the only lead he had left.

Blake banged wildly at Jarvis's townhouse door.

*They took her ladyship.* The footman's words still rang in his mind, so he kicked at the door, cursing for it to open.

Jarvis was the only person left on his damned list of suspects; he'd disappeared from the clubs the same night that the fight broke out in the hell, and the thugs escaped Hades' punishment.

But if he was wrong and Jarvis was not responsible, Blake would have nowhere else to go. His only other option would be to turn all of England on its head. And he'd do it too, only to find his Annalise and spare her the cruel fate he'd suffered.

The door opened, and a weathered old butler sketched a bow. Blake stormed past him.

"I need to see your master," he threw over his shoulder and stalked to Jarvis's study.

"He is not to be disturbed!" the servant yelled, hurrying after Blake.

"To hell, he isn't!"

Blake entered the spacious study. Jarvis had been sitting behind the desk, but noticing Blake, he stood with a wide grin on his face.

Blake reached Jarvis and made a swing at his face. Jarvis's expression of delight turned into confusion for a split moment before he ducked. He got hold of Blake's arm and moved behind him. With a loud bang, he smashed Blake's face into the desk.

Blake had barely time to blink, so quickly did this happen. *How the hell did he do that?* But the shock was replaced by Blake's anger.

"Where the devil is she, Jarvis?" he yelled.

"Where is who?"

"Do not play innocent here, Jarvis. Where is my wife?" Blake sneered against the surface of the desk.

"Why in the world would I know where she is?" Jarvis let him free and slowly stepped away from him, hands raised in the air.

Blake straightened and turned to him, panting. "I know it's you. You are the one who plotted my capture. It makes sense, your strange behavior, your carriage from which I got taken—"

"You never reached my carriage!"

"Or so you say. But I don't give a fig about that. Tell me where Annalise is, and I'll let you live." Blake took out a musket and aimed it at Jarvis.

"You are out of your mind," Jarvis exclaimed. "I had nothing to do with your capture. And

Annalise is gone? How—Why do you think that?” He paused. “Perhaps she just left you. In which case, I’d be looking at Kensington’s.”

With a growl, Blake ran toward Jarvis and swung at his face again. Jarvis ducked, but Blake’s knuckles still grazed his chin. He reared back and raised his arms in surrender.

“Stop it, Blake. I had nothing to do with it. I swear. But I can help.”

“How can you help?” Blake was breathing heavily, his heart thudding in his ears. “How can anyone help me? She... It’s all because of me.” He scrubbed his sweaty face with his palms, then thread his fingers through his hair. “She is suffering because of me. It’s all my fault. It’s always been my fault.”

Jarvis made a tentative step toward him and slowly patted him on the shoulder. “There will be plenty of time for self-pity later, my friend. Tell me everything you know. I shall help you find her.”

Blake bit on his lower lip and shook his head. “I know nothing. Why else would I be here punching air? Her carriage left the drive at half-past eleven. I told her not to travel right after the ball, but she”—he closed his eyes briefly in agony—“she didn’t want to spend another night in the same house as me. I sent four footmen with her and the driver, but it still wasn’t enough.

“Two and a half hours later, a bruised and bloodied footman ran up the steps to our townhouse and declared that someone accosted them just outside the city. Several thugs pulled guns on them, took Annalise, and rode away. They took the horses, so they wouldn’t be followed. But Annalise, she’s... I don’t even know where they took her. The footman said they headed back toward the city. I would only guess they moved toward the docks, where I was kept.”

Jarvis frowned in thought, but an insistent bang on the door interrupted his musings. There were muffled noises, and then the voices grew louder.

“Someone else is at the door.” Jarvis raised a brow. “Perhaps more people came to accuse me.”

Jarvis led Blake back to the main hall, where the butler spoke calmly to a man over the threshold. The moment the man saw Blake, he pushed past the butler and stalked toward him. Ford.

“The thief-taker,” Jarvis grumbled.

“Oh, good! You’re here.” Blake expelled a breath of relief. The thief-taker would know what to do, surely.

"I received your note," he said. "Tell me everything."

Once Blake recited the events of the morning again, Ford scratched his jaw thoughtfully.

"Let me send a note to my men. We need all the help we can get here."

"Very well, but what are we to do? Do you think Hades will help us hunt his rogues down?"

Jarvis scoffed. "Hades does not help people."

Ford gave him a curious look before turning to Blake. "I do not think it wise for you to go anywhere. In fact, you shouldn't have left the townhouse."

"What?"

"Since the thugs took Annalise and did not harm her, I suppose they have a motive of their own. And they will probably be contacting us to let us know what their demands are."

"And what are we supposed to do until then?" Blake threw up his hands.

"Wait."

"You are mad if you think I shall be sitting on my arse while Annalise is in peril!"

"And what are you going to do, then? Ride up and down the road looking for any sign of her? You'll just waste time and energy. It isn't worth it."

"It's my wife we are talking about, you cur!" Blake grabbed Ford by his cravat and slammed him against the wall.

"Blake!" Jarvis put a calming hand on Blake's arm. "The man is right."

"To hell he is!" Blake growled.

Ford took advantage of Blake's distracted state and freed himself from the hold.

He cleared his throat. "You feel free to roam around the docks then, and we'll be the ones actually getting your wife back."

Blake turned on his heel and raked his hands through his hair, his entire body vibrating with anxiety and helplessness.

Somewhere out there, Annalise was in the company of thugs, and there was nothing he could do to help her. What if they hurt her? What if they were doing unspeakable things to her at this very moment while he prowled in this townhouse?

Useless.

He felt completely and utterly useless. And it was all his fault. If he wasn't such a bastard, Annalise would never have left him, and she'd be safely tucked in by his side, sleeping peacefully in his arms.

Annalise sat on the cold, dirty floor, hugging her knees to her chest.

She hadn't moved ever since the captors threw her into the basement of an old, rickety building and left her there. It felt like hours had passed, but she had no way of telling for sure. In the dark, all sense of time left her.

It was pitch black, and the darkness was suffocating her. She had no idea if the room she was held in was big or small, if it had any furniture or was empty, and she was frightened to make a sound, fearing that she was not alone.

The squeaking of a rodent startled her as the animal ran past her. Annalise jumped up and shook out her skirts in disgust. She hugged herself close and squinted in the dark. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed a slight shadow playing on the wall opposite hers.

A shadow. Which meant there was a source of light somewhere. She turned and saw a narrow window up on the wall. It was barely letting in the light. It seemed like the window was covered with something. She came closer and stood on her tiptoes to inspect the window. Was it dirt, stones or—

Steps sounded outside her door. Then the key rattled in the keyhole. Annalise burrowed into the opposite corner of the room and made herself as small as she could.

The thug appeared in the doorway. "Here, drink some of that."

He threw a flask her way without stepping down from the stairs, then left the room as quickly as he appeared, locking the door behind him and leaving Annalise in complete darkness once more.

Annalise slowly made her way toward the flask. She shuffled her feet, hoping she would stumble upon it easier that way. She wanted a drink. She hadn't had a drop since before their carriage was stopped by the bandits.

The sound was deafening to her ears when she finally reached the flask and kicked it with the tip of her slipper. She picked it up and opened it, ready to gulp down the vitalizing elixir.

But the smell that hit her was not a pleasant one. It was some kind of alcohol. Annalise wasn't versed enough to recognize it by smell, but it was foul to her senses. Nevertheless, she took a sip and grimaced as the fiery liquid passed down her throat, burning the path to her stomach.

Annalise closed the flask, dropped it into her pocket, and turned back to the dim, lone window. She carefully walked forward and squinted at it, trying to figure out what was

blocking the view.

Ah, yes. It looked like leaves! If her addled brain wasn't fooling her and it was indeed just leaves and dirt, she would be able to push the window open, and hopefully, crawl out of it.

The only problem was that it was high up. Even if she did open it, there was no way she would be able to pull herself up far enough to crawl through it.

Annalise looked around but found nothing she could stand on to help her reach the window better. She came closer to the wall again and ran her palm over it. It was a stony wall with indents, large enough that she could hook her toe in. She hiked up her skirts, raised her foot, and placed it on the wall.

Seemed sturdy enough. Annalise raised her arms and held onto the windowsill with all her might. She raised her second foot and... skittered down.

She hit the wall with her knee on the way down, and her hands felt raw from scratching them down the rugged wall. Dust and dirt flew around her, and she coughed into her sleeve.

Well, this wasn't going to be as easy as she hoped. *You have to fall to learn*—her husband's words rang in her mind. At the moment he'd said them, he hadn't meant it literally. He had definitely fallen a few times in his life and had fallen hard. Had he learned, though? Would she live to find out? Would she ever see him again?

When she had left the townhouse, she was adamant about living on her own, but she had never thought that the moment her carriage jolted to a start, that view of her husband out the window would be the last time she'd ever see him.

Annalise wiped at her brow. There was no time to get maudlin. If she wanted to see him again, even if to scold him that it was all his fault, she needed to get out of this predicament alive.

*Oh, Lord, help me get out of this alive.*

Annalise hiked up her skirts again and put both feet on the indents in the wall before pulling herself up with both arms. She pushed at the window with one hand while holding on for dear life with the other. The window creaked and opened.

Annalise's feet slipped, and she skittered down again.

Annalise wiped her hands on her skirts, took a deep breath, and tried again. Eventually, the window gave way, and the opening seemed to be enough for her to crawl through. She was tired and panting; her hands and face were sullied by the leaves and dirt that fell through the open window. A few tiny stones had hit her in the forehead, and her eyes were itching.

Annalise leaned her back against the wall and took a deep breath. She fumbled with her



skirts and took out the flask with the vile drink. She whirled it in her hand before uncorking it and taking a big gulp. The burning liquid passed through her throat with an unpleasant stinging. She closed the flask and put it back in her skirt's pocket. Her breaths came in shallow gulps, her palms were burning, and her feet ached.

A strange sound came from outside the door. Annalise concentrated, trying to hear what was going on. Did it sound like a brawl?

Perhaps her gaolers had gotten foxed and were fighting. If this were true, they could be coming for her soon, and there'd be no telling what they'd do to her in that condition.

She turned sharply and reached for the windowsill one more time, pushed off the ground with a jump, and crammed herself through the window. Her head and torso made it through the window with no issue. But when the time came for her skirts to follow, she got stuck. The sounds got louder on the other side of the door, and panic hit her.

*Blast it all!* Annalise wriggled in haste, grabbing beyond the window, onto the ground, or anything she could reach. She heard the sound of fabric ripping as she fit her hips through the window. *It's all right; I'll buy new skirts, just please, let me leave this place.*

"Oy!" The door opened behind her, and a man yelled after her.

Annalise dug her fingers into the ground and pulled with all her might. The fabric ripped further, and one of her slippers fell from her foot, but she didn't look back. She was free. Annalise jumped to her feet, picked up her skirts, and ran for her life.

## Chapter 20



A note came to Blake's house a few hours after he returned to his townhouse.

The ransom note.

By that time, Blake had worn the floor of his study as he paced around with nothing to do but wait. He'd convinced Ford to send his people to check the docks because that's where Blake believed he had been kept before. A few men were sent to check the place where Annalise was taken from. Jamison, the man who managed to secure an audience with Hades before, even went back to the hell to try to convince Hades to help.

But Jarvis and Ford kept Blake prowling in the townhouse with nothing to do.

It was a good thing, he supposed, as he read the poorly written note in a barely decipherable scrawl. It had lots of grammatical errors, but the message was clear. The thugs demanded a round sum to leave England, which Blake would be happy to give if only there was a guarantee they'd let Annalise go.

The note said to meet them at the back of the White Stag tavern at dawn, down by the docks. Which meant Blake had been right in his assumptions. Annalise was there by the docks, too.

"Dawn is in a few hours, but we might as well go now and circle the area. Perhaps we can find something suspicious that can help us find the thugs' hideout," Ford said.

*Finally, something to do and not just sit on our arses.* "We need to take a carriage, in case Annalise is... injured or tired. I don't want her riding on my horse."

"You're probably right, if—" Ford got interrupted as the door flew open then, and two of Ford's men came in, looking winded. One of them had a basket in his hand.

Miss Gale's basket.

Blake rushed and took it from the man. He opened the lid, and the kitten flew out of it and jumped on Blake's shoulder. Blake took Miss Gale gently in his hands.

"You are alive, you little spawn of the devil," he said, gently cradling the kitten to his chest. The kitten struggled, and Blake let her down. Instead of running away, it started circling

Blake's legs, sniffing him as if making sure she was back home.

"What else did you find?" Blake asked the men.

"Nothing, sir. Your servants are taken care of. The doctor arrived in the village just as we were leaving. And we brought back the carriage."

"Good," Blake said with a nod. "Take the carriage; you're coming with us to the docks."

The men armed themselves with muskets and knives and headed out.

\* \* \*

The moon was hidden behind the clouds, so it was difficult to make out anything in the dark. Blake forced himself to concentrate on the goal—finding Annalise—and tried to ignore the shortness of breath and his perspiring forehead. The darkness had the strangest effect on him.

Blake didn't want to think about Annalise, scared and alone in the dark dungeon. He didn't want to think what the thugs would do to her during the night. He just wanted to get to her and take her home.

The journey lasted tortuously long, even though they rode at a breakneck pace. But finally, they reached the White Stag and tied their horses. They left the carriage a few streets north not to draw unwanted attention, with Ford's associates looking after it.

"Let us disperse," Jarvis said. "This way, we'll have a better chance of finding something."

"Yes, and this is also the best way to get killed around here," Ford grumbled.

"Just do not go too far and give a long whistle if you're in peril."

"Whistle? Right, this is exactly what I am doing if I am being beaten to death." Ford scoffed and muttered under his breath, "Toff."

"There's no time to argue," Blake growled. "I shall stay in the White Stag and see if I recognize anyone. Ford, you can take the area around the tavern and Jarvis, go wherever you think you need to. But be on the lookout and shoot at any sign of trouble. Whistle if you find anything."

Jarvis raised a brow toward Ford and walked away.

"He is going to die, you know," Ford said.

Blake watched Jarvis disappear in silence. "Go watch him," he told Ford as soon as the door closed behind his friend. Ford raised a brow. "I am not certain I trust him yet."

Ford gave a nod. "Whistle," he said with a wink and disappeared after Jarvis.

Blake walked around the noisy tavern. The drunken sailors, the cursing, and the foul smell all reminded him of times he'd spent on the ship. The sounds started blurring in his head, and a slight buzzing appeared in his ears. There was nothing in this tavern to help him find Annalise. Deep down, he knew that. He was wasting his time there. But where was he supposed to go?

He kept walking, rubbing shoulders with drunken sailors.

What if it was too late? What if they boarded Annalise on one of those slave ships?

His breathing turned rapid, and the sounds blurred into one. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe. Blake ran out of the tavern as if the devil was on his heels. Once on the street, he took deep breaths. The smell from the Thames didn't help. He felt nauseous and ill. His skin was clammy, and his heart beat rapidly against his chest.

"Blake!" Ford's voice came from somewhere next to him, then, a strong hand clapped him on the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Blake whirled around and saw Ford, his forehead creased in worry lines.

"I am well." Blake took deep breaths and looked around. He had to be well. He couldn't let the memories overtake him and make him useless. Annalise needed him.

"I've lost your friend," Ford said.

Blake's eyes widened. "What?"

"I've lost him. I left the tavern, but he was already nowhere to be found; I looked around but—"

A low whistle interrupted Ford, and both Blake and he turned in the direction of the sound.

"Could be a trap," Ford murmured and took out his musket.

Blake followed.

"Be on the lookout, and don't step far away from me."

A few moments later, they reached an old, rickety building. The place was dark and ominous, but a few loud voices were heard arguing inside.

Jarvis stood there, peering in from the side window. Blake expelled a breath of relief. It seemed that he'd worried over his friend's betrayal in vain.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Just a few shadows. One of them is entirely too huge. There seems to be drinking going on."

"How many?" Ford asked.

Jarvis shrugged. "You're welcome to take a look yourself; it's too dark. More than three, that's for certain."

"What do we do?" Blake asked.

Ford grimaced in thought. "Here's what. I am going to knock—"

"Do you think the thugs will just open the door, let us in, and offer us tea and biscuits?" Jarvis gave a disbelieving huff.

"I shall knock," Ford repeated slowly. "And you"—he pointed at Blake—"will stand just by the door, but not in the line of light. And you will give me the nod if the man who answers the door is one of the thugs who held you prisoner."

"What if it is him?"

"Then I shall pull out my musket and shoot him, and you are free to follow me and shoot at anyone in the way."

"But what if I don't recognize him?"

"Then I shall ask him about the group of thugs who stole a beautiful lady and watch his reaction."

"I have no issue letting the thief-taker go first," Jarvis grumbled and hid behind Blake.

"All right, but don't let anyone out of your sight. I don't want them going for Annalise and whisking her away, or worse," Blake said, his heart squeezing.

"Don't go for the kill either, if you can help it. We want these men prosecuted, and we want to find out who hired them," Ford whispered before coming closer to the door.

"Of course, I shall be sure to remember that when they are killing me," Jarvis muttered behind Blake.

Ford let out a deep sigh. "May God help us all."

He raised his hand and gingerly rapped on the door.

A ruckus from the inside followed the knock.

"Who's there?" said the gravelly voice behind the door, and Blake's skin crawled.

He didn't need to see the thug's face. He recognized his voice. All these months later, it still made his hair stand on end.

"Lost travelers," Ford shouted.

"Shove off!" the man answered, and Ford raised a brow to Blake.

Blake nodded, raising his musket. Ford stepped back and kicked in the door.

A shot fired, followed by a few more. The pungent smell of gunpowder and smoke filled

the air. Blake rushed into the den but got shoved out of the way by Jarvis just as another shot rang out.

Blake dropped to the floor on instinct, covering his head with his hands.

As the smoke cleared out, he saw Ford lying on the floor unconscious. Jarvis, bleeding from his shoulder, was fighting two men on the other side of the room. Blake fought to get to his feet, only to get knocked down by a mighty blow to his face.

His nose hurt, and his eyes watered, but he didn't lose his concentration. He raised the musket, but before he could fire, it got kicked out of his hand.

Blake jumped to his feet and tackled the huge thug. Managing to disorient him, Blake landed a few blows to the thug's jaw before the bandit took him by the coat and slammed his ribs into the table.

An unbearable pain shot from his chest. This wasn't the worst pain he'd suffered in his life, though. So he straightened and looked the thug in the eye, the same man who'd delighted in torturing him for weeks, a year and a half ago, and smirked.

"I was bound when you tortured me before," he said. "Now we are on equal terms."

"Not so equal," the man sneered and took out a dagger.

Blake's eyes darted to the side in search of his musket. The thug followed his eye movement and shook his head. Before he could make another move, Blake jumped to the ground and skittered toward the gun. He took a shot and watched as his torturer dropped to the ground.

Blake breathed heavily, watching the man, who had delighted in causing him pain, lie on the floor, holding his side.

Blake hadn't killed him. He deliberately didn't aim at his heart. He didn't think he could murder a person. Even after all the pain he had suffered, taking a life was not something he was able to do. Or perhaps especially after everything he'd gone through.

Only one thing would make him murder the thug. If he'd hurt Annalise.

*Annalise.*

Blake scrambled to his feet. He glanced to the corner where Jarvis had been fighting a moment ago. One of the thugs was lying on the floor in the pool of his blood while Jarvis worked on tying up the other one.

Blake looked to the side where Ford lay. He had a head wound, and there was blood seeping from his leg. Blake felt his pulse and, when he was satisfied that his friend was alive, stood, holding his burning chest.

"Jarvis, can you bandage Ford?"

Jarvis looked up from tying the bandit. "In a moment," he answered, seemingly unperturbed and barely winded. However, his left arm hung uselessly at his side.

Blake gave him a nod and walked toward the thug.

The man lay on the ground, hugging his wound.

"Where's Annalise?" Blake asked.

The thug had the gall to smirk. "She is not here."

"What the devil are you talking about?" It hurt his lungs to speak, but he didn't care anymore.

"She is not here," the thug repeated. "And now you will never find her."

The thug coughed and closed his eyes.

"Annalise!" Blake yelled and hurried through the house, checking every room and closet.

He noticed a heavy oak door leading to a dark room, a basement. He knew that because he'd stared at this oak door for weeks in the dark. He approached it slowly and pushed it in. The door was unlocked.

He walked in and stepped down the creaky stairs leading into the hollow room.

Blake's screams of the past echoed inside his head, the darkness suffocating him.

"Annalise?" His voice was a hoarse whisper. He thought he repeated her name again, only louder, but he wasn't certain.

The room was empty. Aside from the horrifying memories, there was nothing there.

"Blake?"

Blake whirled. Jarvis was standing on the steps throwing a vast shadow into the room. Blake's breaths accelerated, panic settling in.

"That window is open." Jarvis tipped his head, and Blake followed the movement. Yes, the window. The same one from his dreams—his nightmares. It was truly there. And it was open. "It seems like Annalise has escaped," Jarvis said.

It was high above the ground. Would Annalise be able to pry it open?

Blake stepped closer and noticed something lying on the floor. He knelt and picked it up. It was a female slipper.

Blake swallowed and fought to calm his rioting heart. "I hope you're right," he croaked out. "This is hers."

They both returned to the main hall, and Blake looked around. Ford's leg was bandaged, and he sat propped against the wall, his eyes still closed. The thugs were tied down on the

floor.

Blake walked toward them. "Where is she?" he barked.

"Harv didn't lie," one of the men said. "She is not here. She was. But not anymore."

"What in the devil does this mean?"

"She ran off," another one supplied. "Just before you arrived. But not to worry. Garry will bring her back."

Blake stilled, his heartbeat the only sound in the room.

"Who the hell is Garry?"

\* \* \*

Annalise ran with all her might through the narrow streets. Her skirts tore as they caught on the corners of bricks and stones, but she just kept moving. Something crunched under her, and she felt a sharp pain shoot through her foot. Annalise cried out in pain, then covered her mouth with her hands before picking up her skirts again and continuing her flight farther away from the place where she'd been held. She limped her way, stepping on the ball of her right foot so as not to hurt herself even more.

Her breath was labored, and her corset made it difficult to take deep gulps of air. Annalise turned the corner and leaned against a tall building, panting. She raised her foot to inspect it and grimaced in pain. It was bleeding, and there was something dark lodged in her bloody cut.

Annalise closed her eyes briefly and took deep breaths to calm her rioting heart.

She slowly picked at her wound with a grimace of pain and managed to pull out a tiny but sharp rock. Tears smarted her eyes, and she dropped the stone with a whimper. Then she rolled her torn stocking down and took it off. Her foot was dirty and covered in blood. How badly had she hurt it?

Annalise wiped her foot with the clean part of her stocking as gently as she could. She put her hand in the pocket and felt the flask the thug had thrown at her. That should do it.

She uncorked the vessel and poured a generous amount of liquid onto her foot. Annalise hissed as her wound burned as if on fire. She clamped her lips and bit on the inside of her cheek so as not to cry out. Tears burned at the back of her eyes.

This wasn't that bad, she reasoned with herself. It would be much worse if she let this



scratch get her caught by the thugs.

Annalise ripped a length of fabric from her petticoats and wrapped her foot with it. She surveyed the streets for any signs of danger but couldn't see or hear anyone. She wasn't far away from the place where she had been kept. She would be easy to find standing out there with no shelter. She needed to move. The farther away she ran, the more chance she would be able to outrun her pursuers.

Annalise took a deep breath and continued on her way.

Her foot gave off a dull ache as she continued limping farther away from her captors. She heard a crunch behind her and stilled. Another crunch. Someone was following her. Annalise took a few deep breaths and dashed forward. She ran, panting, her skirts in her hands, her hair in her eyes, but she didn't dare look behind her.

She was vulnerable out in the open. She needed shelter. Just as she thought it, a tall, dark, half-finished building appeared before her. This would have to do.

She picked up her skirts again to race up the steps, but at that moment, someone yanked her hard by her hair. A scream ripped out of her throat.

"Where do you think you are going, pet?" a dry, unpleasant voice said in her ear.

## Chapter 21



Blake ran out of the house and looked around, Annalise's slipper in one hand, the thug's dagger in another. How in the devil would he be able to choose the right direction? Annalise could have gone anywhere, and the thug was on her heels.

An ear-splitting scream sounded at that moment, and Blake dashed toward it on instinct. His chest burned, and his breathing was shallow, but he couldn't think about it now. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but Annalise.

When he finally reached the scene of a struggle, what he saw made his blood run cold. A burly bandit was dragging a thrashing Annalise by her hair.

With a growl, Blake rushed and knocked the thug off his feet. The bandit let go of Annalise and fell to the ground.

Annalise scrambled to a sitting position and propped her back against the building, her eyes wild.

Blake unsheathed the dagger and attacked the thug. The latter rolled off just in time, evading the blow, and Blake fell to his knees. Blake collected himself and scrambled to a standing position, wheezing with every breath. The thug stood and faced Blake. He was tall and broad-shouldered, like the others, but he was better dressed and groomed. His face, however, had a fresh scratch on it, and his eye was half-open on the injured side.

"Blake." His name was a prayer on Annalise's lips.

"Payne," the thug said. "So you are the toff who gave us all the trouble. Well, the trouble ends now."

The bandit flew toward Blake, swinging punches. Blake lost the dagger but managed to block some hits. Blake threw a punch and landed a solid blow to the thug's freshly scratched eye. It broke the skin, and blood started dripping slowly down his face. Instead of grimacing in pain, the bandit smiled widely and renewed his attack. One of his blows managed to hit Blake hard in the nose. Blake staggered back, his eyes shut on impact, and stars appeared in his vision, while a sharp pain originated at the bridge of his nose. Blake wiped the blood and

opened his eyes.

The thug was already kneeling over Annalise, but before he could grab her, Annalise took a handful of dirt and threw it into his eyes.

The thug cursed, trying to clear his eyes in vain. The dirt mixed with his blood stuck to his face. Blake picked up his dagger, walked over, and hit him as hard as he could in the eye with his fist.

The thug dropped to the ground with a grunt. Blake stood over him, his breathing shallow, his nose bleeding, and his chest burning. He clutched the dagger tightly in his hand, preparing to swing. This lowly thug didn't deserve to live.

"Blake." Annalise's soft voice distracted him from his dark thoughts.

He turned to her, and nothing else mattered at that moment. Annalise was alive and well. She was beside him, if not for long. He slowly walked toward her and helped her up. She limped as she stood and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him close.

His ribs burned, but he didn't care. He inhaled Annalise's dear scent and ran his hands through her hair.

"Are you all right, my darling?" he whispered.

"I am now," she whispered back.

Sobs shook her body as Annalise cried in Blake's arms. He crooned soothing nonsense in her ear, the rest of the world disappearing. She finally disengaged from him and wiped at her teary cheeks.

"Your nose is bleeding," she said in choked laughter.

Blake took out a handkerchief from his pocket and placed it against his nose. "And this is funny, because?"

Annalise let out another chuckle. "Apologies. It isn't. I don't know why I am laughing."

Blake tsked. "I suppose I deserve to suffer, don't you think?"

Annalise gave him a soft smile and shook her head.

"My friends, Ford the thief-taker and St. John, are here. We've apprehended the other bandits and should probably find something to tie this one with."

He turned, only to see that there was no one there. The bandit had escaped. Annalise peeked over Blake's shoulder and frowned at the empty place.

"He's gone," she breathed.

"It doesn't matter." Blake turned back to Annalise and brushed the locks of her hair away from her face. He tried to convince himself of the same thing. They'd figure it out later. At the

moment, he needed to take his bedraggled wife home. "Come. There's a carriage waiting for us not too far away from here."

Annalise took a step and yelped in pain.

"What is wrong?"

"My foot. I lost my slipper, and I stepped on something. My foot aches."

"Show me."

Annalise shook her head. "I wrapped it with a piece of my petticoat. I lost my slipper along the way—"

"I know. I found it but ended up losing it again during the fight." He looked around.

"It doesn't matter, I shan't be able to wear it, but how did you find it? How did you find me?"

Blake cupped her cold cheek in his hand. "I shall always find you, darling."

Annalise leaned into the touch, her eyes wet with tears. "I thought I'd never see you again," she said hoarsely.

"I know, my sweet. Me too." He hugged her tighter.

"Who are those people? What did they want?"

Blake swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. "They came for me," he said with a gravelly voice. "They came for me, my darling. They wanted me to stop the manhunt. I've been looking for my captors ever since I docked back in England. These thugs were the ones who kept me imprisoned. Only they were hired goons. Someone else sent them after me. The same someone who now wanted to silence them. They captured you to demand ransom so they could leave England. I am sorry."

"It isn't your fault," she said softly.

*Of course, it is.* Blake didn't want to argue the point. "Let us go. You're getting cold." He took Annalise's hands and warmed them between his.

"It hurts to step on my foot," Annalise said with an apologetic smile. "Perhaps if we walk slowly—"

"Not to worry, darling, I shall carry you."

"You don't have to. I can limp—"

But Blake had already bent his knees, squatting before her. He took her right arm and slung her across his shoulders. Annalise yelped as she landed with her torso on top of his shoulders, her legs dangling. Blake straightened with a grunt and moved toward the bandit hideout, his chest burning with every step.

They walked in silence because Blake could barely breathe, much less speak. He supposed Annalise wasn't all too comfortable speaking upside down, either.

When they finally reached the hideout, there were horses tied outside.

He entered the building and gently sat Annalise on the floor. Ford's associates were there, carrying an unconscious Ford out of the house.

Jarvis came closer to Blake as he noticed them. "My lady," he addressed Annalise. "I am happy to see you are well."

"Thank you."

He turned to Blake then. "The thief-takers will take care of Ford, but he is in poor condition." Jarvis didn't look well himself. He was holding a cloth to his shoulder, and his forehead glistened with sweat. "They need the carriage. I shall help them convey the other thugs. Can you two ride?"

Blake shook his head. He didn't think he'd be able to stand for long, much less walk or ride.

"Well, there's room for one of you in the carriage. You don't look too good. Perhaps you should go with Ford, and Lady Payne will ride—"

"No," Blake interrupted swiftly. "I just got her back. I am not leaving her."

"Blake, it's the only reasonable—"

"No," Blake interrupted once more. Firmer this time. There was no way he was letting Annalise out of his sight again.

"Well, can you wait? I can send for my carriage, but it'll take some time."

"Yes, waiting is splendid," Blake muttered and slowly sat beside Annalise against the wall.

Jarvis looked at him, worry creasing his brow. "I shall leave one of the men to guard you, but"—he took out a musket and handed it to Annalise—"if anything happens, shoot."

"I'll whistle," Blake said with a smirk.

"Whom should I shoot?" Annalise looked at the musket in panic.

"Whoever walks through that door. Except for my driver. He will be wearing blue livery."

As the room cleared, Blake felt the strength leave him. He leaned against the wall heavier, soaking in the reassuring heat from Annalise's side.

"Blake, are you all right?" Annalise's voice was filled with worry.

"I am all right, darling," he whispered and took her hand in his. "Tell me something."

"What?"

"Anything, I just want to hear your voice."

Annalise squeezed his hand in hers. She paused in thought. "Do you remember that time you asked me about my most fervent wishes?" she asked finally.

"Yes." Blake's voice was hoarse. It was getting more difficult to speak.

"Well, when I was a little child, I made a wish upon a full moon. I wished for a prince. My own prince who would carry me around in his arms so that I wouldn't have to dirty my slippers." She let out a chuckle, and Blake smiled.

"Will an earl do?"

"The one who carries me, so I don't have to step on my injured foot? Very much."

There was a beat of silence. "When I came back from my capture, I thought for the longest time that the darkness was my deepest fear. I've been too long in the dark, and I don't want to go back. I had trouble sleeping because of my fear. But today has proved that my true greatest fear is losing you."

Annalise gave his hand another squeeze.

"However, if I let you go from the start, if I let you go when I had just come back... You'd be in Sussex now, or perhaps even in Italy. You'd be safe."

"I would rather be here," Annalise said softly. "With you."

"Don't just say that." His voice was a whisper. Blake coughed, and his chest felt like it would burst.

"Blake, perhaps you shouldn't try to speak... I think something is wrong. We should wait for a doctor—"

"I've had worse. A lot worse, my darling. And that's why I didn't want to tell you what I went through during my absent months." He paused, his breath wheezing out with every exhale. "I was beaten, starved, whipped... and worse," he said hoarsely. "To the point that I didn't want to live anymore. But I knew I had to. Because I couldn't die without seeing your face one more time. You saved me."

"Did they keep you here all that time?"

"No, darling. It was much worse. They sold me to a slave ship."

Annalise gasped. "Blake—"

"I spent months there working from dawn to nightfall. The things I witnessed, the things they did to me are too gruesome." He coughed, his breathing becoming labored.

Annalise raised her eyes to his. "Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"Because I didn't want you to stay with me out of pity. Because I didn't want you to know the disgrace I came to. Because I didn't want you to know how terrible life can be. I wanted to

shield you from it all..."

"I'd rather you had shared this with me from the start. It would have helped me understand you so much better. All this time, I thought you didn't trust me—"

"Well, I did put your name on the list... But I was an idiot. And it is a diagnosis unlikely to go away any time soon," he said with a sad smile. "I want you to know that I never meant to hurt you. I love you too much. All I wanted was to protect you from hurt. Well, I've failed you miserably and ruined our marriage in the process. The truth is there is nothing more important to me than you. Not even my life. Because you're the reason I am still breathing." He coughed again. "Even if it hurts."

"Blake." Annalise's voice sounded far away. He raised his eyes to her. "Blake," she repeated, her eyes wide and frightened, and that was the last thing Blake saw before everything went dark.

\* \* \*

Cool fingers swept against his forehead.

Finally, that dream again. It seemed he hadn't dreamed of her in forever. He'd missed those dreams. Her tender touch. So gentle and soft. He yearned to feel more of her. Not just her fingers against his forehead, but perhaps her hand against his cheek. Her lips on his...

Her touch left him, and he wanted to scream for it to return. *No! Not in my dreams. Don't take her away from me! This dream is all I have left because she left me.*

She had left him. Again. He was left alone and confused in his empty townhouse, his heart bleeding. All because he was a selfish arse.

No. Reality had no place in his dreams.

In his dreams, Annalise was by his side, tenderly taking care of him. Her fingers traced a path against his cheek, then caressed his lips, leaving a tingly sensation in their wake.

The scent of lavender made its way to his senses. Her dear scent.

"Wake up, darling." *Her lovely voice.*

*Wait...* That had never happened before. He'd never heard her voice in his dreams. Was it still a dream?

Blake reached for her hand hovering above his face and took it in his.

Her soft skin beneath his fingers felt like the most precious of silks. He ran his fingers

over hers, then brought them to his lips and kissed them. His lips were dry and scratchy, but her cool fingers felt like a balm.

“Blake?” Her voice penetrated his foggy dream-like state.

He opened his eyes and beheld her lovely face. “I love you,” he croaked out.

Annalise pursed her lips against the smile that threatened to break out. “You are awake.”

“Yes,” he croaked. “I am awake, and I shall not stop telling you and showing you just how much I love you as long as I am awake.”

Annalise smiled and ran her fingers against his lips again. “Your lips are dry. Here, have some water.”

Blake took a glass in his hand and had a few sips. He handed her the glass back and struggled to sit up, his entire torso screaming in pain. Annalise helped readjust his pillows.

Her face was too close to his. He wanted to lean forward and capture her mouth with his. Annalise leaned back and straightened in her seat.

Blake took her hands in his. “I love you.”

She grinned. “You keep saying that.”

“Twice is not enough.”

“No.” She shook her head, still smiling. “I don’t mean now. When we brought you home, the doctor looked you over. You were in horrible pain, so he doused you with laudanum. You’ve been sleeping for three days. But every time you woke up, the first words out of your mouth were always *I love you*.”

Blake frowned. “Three days?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been watching over me for three days?”

“Well, me and Miss Gale alternated shifts.”

“Where is that spawn of the devil?”

Annalise let out a chuckle. “Don’t call her that. She saved us.”

“She did?”

“Yes.” Annalise nodded. “That scratch over the bandit’s eye—the one that helped us defeat him. She did that.”

Blake raised a brow. “She was protecting you. I suppose I owe her an apology and gratitude. Well, where is she?”

“We had to keep her away from your room because she kept jumping onto your bed with the full intention of lying on your broken ribs. I think she wants to heal you. But the doctor



said to keep your ribs bound and to not touch them, so she had to go.”

“I have broken ribs?” Blake grimaced. So that’s what that burning pain in his chest was.

“Yes.”

Blake expelled a painful breath. “Thank you for watching over me.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve never done anything for you to be so good to me.”

“Well, you did save my life.”

“After putting you in peril.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said gently.

“If I wasn’t a selfish arse, you wouldn’t have left. And none of that would have happened.”

“You can’t know that.”

Blake shook his head. “All I wanted to do was spare you the pain. Instead, you’ve had a peek at my gruesome past. But trust me when I say the rest is worse.”

“Blake.” Annalise squeezed his hands. “I never expected there not to be any hardship. I know what you went through was awful. I’ve seen your scars. I just wanted you to share your problems with me. All I ever wanted was a true family. I have never had one. My parents barely talk to each other; they never cared about me. I was always alone, with nobody to rely on. I wanted our marriage to be different. The fact that you wouldn’t speak of your past hurt me, but it didn’t hurt as much as your lack of interest in my affairs.”

“My darling, wife. Perhaps I have been selfish. But only because I was so embarrassed with the way I left things: you and me at discord, the estate struggling, you uncared for. I felt helpless and powerless thinking about it. I just wanted to move on. I wanted to forget the past, and I never took into consideration what you wanted. I never imagined you had far darker memories of your own.” He brought her hands to his lips and kissed her fingers. “I want you to always be able to share your thoughts, your joy, and sorrow with me....” He cleared his throat. “If that is something you still want.”

Annalise frowned and tugged her hands out of his hold. “When I was in that dungeon, frightened and alone, I kept thinking, *if I ever get out of this place, I shall give Blake a piece of my mind.*” She laughed.

“I am in desperate need of your mind,” Blake said gently.

“The fact is, I think we have a lot to work through. But I do not think I am ready to never see you again.”

Blake let out a breath. “Does that mean you are not leaving me?”

Annalise bit her lip. "Perhaps? But I don't want to start at the beginning; I don't want to forget the past. I want to learn from it."

Blake tugged on her arm until her lips were hair's-breadth away from his. "Deal."

He kissed her tenderly, sipping on her lips, devouring her taste. She ran her hand against his stubbly cheek, then lowered it, caressing his chin.

"Blake," she breathed as she pulled away. "The doctor said you should rest."

"I can't imagine a better rest, darling."

She kissed him again, running her sweet tongue over his lips, and he groaned. His breaths accelerated, making his chest burn even more, but he didn't care. He wanted to marvel at her taste. He needed to feel her on him.

Blake fought to throw off the covers then reached to undo his underdrawers. Annalise helped him take them off.

Blake lay there naked, other than the wrap around his torso, his cock throbbing, begging for her touch, already fully erect. Annalise got off the bed, and Blake whimpered. She smiled and slowly, torturously drew her dressing gown off her shoulders, and it fell to the floor. Off went the nightgown, and she was completely naked before him.

Blake devoured her beautiful form with his eyes, his hands itching to touch her.

Annalise crawled on top of him, straddling his hips, and lowered her mouth to his. Blake kissed her while his hands worked to free her hair from the pins. When he was done, he ran his hands through her locks as they fell, creating a curtain around them.

"You are beautiful," he croaked.

Annalise smiled and kissed him again. "Does it hurt?" she asked and ran a light hand over his torso.

"Not much. Only when I breathe."

Annalise let out a muffled chuckle. "Perhaps then we shouldn't."

Blake grabbed her by her thighs. "Do not dare to tease me thus, wife," he growled.

He kissed her again, deeply, while his hand traveled between her legs and played with the wet folds. He wanted to taste her, wanted to drink the evidence of her desire.

He plunged two fingers inside her warmth while his tongue dipped inside her sweet mouth. Annalise moaned as her hips started riding his fingers.

Blake couldn't take it anymore. His cock was ready to burst from want. He withdrew his fingers and spread the wetness around her nipples. He took her by the waist, guided her higher, and took her breast into his mouth. The taste of her muddled his senses.

He took his cock in his hand and rubbed it. "I want you to sit on my cock, darling, and ride me hard."

Annalise looked at him in worry. "I don't want to accidentally hurt you."

"You won't."

"I might touch your chest while in the throes of passion."

Blake grinned wolfishly. He wanted her in the throes of passion. He wanted her wild. "Turn around," he whispered.

Annalise raised her brow. She slowly turned around and straddled his thighs, her back to him, her beautiful bum cradling his cock.

He took her in his hands and kneaded her buttocks. Annalise moaned.

"Take my cock, darling. Please. I want to be inside you."

Annalise took him in hand and caressed his length. She lifted her hips, guided him to her center, and rubbed her wet petals over him, making him groan. Then she slowly, torturously, started descending on his cock. Her muscles gripped him tight, making him growl in frustration and delight.

"Yes, my darling. Just like that. Now move your hips," he said as she was seated, sheathed, on his cock.

She moved, and he threw his head back in bliss. Their moans turned into one as Annalise rode his cock enthusiastically. She rubbed herself against him, increasing her rhythm and whimpering in frustration.

"Slower, my dear, don't push yourself."

"I don't—I can't—" she whimpered again.

She was too inexperienced in her desires yet. She fought for her orgasm, chased it without success.

"Shh, darling," he whispered. "Touch yourself."

"What?"

"Touch yourself, darling. Where you most want it. Where you're most frustrated."

Annalise paused for a moment, breathing heavily. Then her hand dipped between her legs, and Blake closed his eyes, imagining her fingers playing with her nub, spreading her juices around.

Annalise moaned, and her hips resumed their rhythmic movement. Her juices trickled, bathing his cock in her hot liquid.

"Yes, my darling. Touch yourself there, good."

“Blake, I...” She broke off on a moan.

“Don’t stop, dear. Chase that feeling. Imagine my lips on your sweet, sweet cunny.”

Annalise’s hips bucked, and she gave a high-pitched moan, pulsing from the inside. Blake growled as his release filled her and his hips jolted, ramming his cock deeper inside her. She started forward and caught herself with her hand, her breathing heavy.

Blake’s chest hurt with his every rapid breath, but he rejoiced on the inside.

Annalise raked her hand through her hair, collecting her silky locks at the back, then looked at him over her shoulder, a smile splitting her lips. Blake put his hands on her hips and slowly guided her off him.

Annalise lay down next to him, her breathing heavy. She looked at him with concern.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“Yes,” he croaked. “But I don’t regret it even for a moment.”

\* \* \*

Annalise woke up the next day in Blake’s bed. She turned and saw him, sitting propped by the pillows, watching her. He smiled, and she covered her face with her hands.

“Do not tell me you have been watching me sleep. I don’t have my nightcap. My hair probably looks like a bird’s nest.”

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “And that nightcap was an abomination.”

Annalise chuckled, snuggled up closer to him, and kissed him on his arm.

“This is the first time I am waking up next to you,” she said.

Blake looked at her curiously. “Is it, truly?”

“Mm.” Annalise closed her eyes and pressed herself closer to his arm, careful not to touch his torso.

His finger started playing in her hair. “I’ve had trouble sleeping in a bed because it’s too soft. I used to sleep on hard wooden or even stone floors. The mattress is... uncomfortable. But the real trouble is the dark. I wake up in the middle of the night and think I am back again, either in the dungeon or on a ship. The fright doesn’t let me fall asleep again.”

“That’s why you always went to your study at night?”

“I thought working would take my mind off the horrible memories. Didn’t always work. Waking up next to you was the favorite part of my day, though.”

"Was it?" She smiled cheekily, and Blake laughed.

He grimaced as the pain must have hit him again. "Second favorite."

"Do you still find the bed uncomfortable, then?"

"Less so now. I think I shall persevere." He grinned.

"Well, we can ask the maids to reduce the padding on your mattress and add a wooden base to the frame if you want."

Blake shook his head. "No, it's all right. I shall get used to it, eventually. I don't want you lying on hard surfaces. and I am planning to spend every night beside you."

"What about the dark?"

"Waking up and seeing your face eases the pain. It will start bothering me less, too, especially when our captors get what they deserve. Speaking of which, I am going to Newgate prison today."

"Pardon? Why would you go there?"

"I want to know why me," Blake rasped.

"But you're not back to your full strength."

"I can walk, and I hope it will make me feel more secure to know why. But please, do not leave this house before I come back."

"Blake, are you certain this is the best course of action?"

Blake raised her fingers to his lips. "Yes, darling. This is something I have to do."

He stood slowly and walked to his clothes. Annalise scrambled after him.

"Let me help you dress," she said as she hastily put on her night shift.

Blake looked mournfully at her naked limbs, rapidly getting covered by the skirt of her shift. "I would have preferred you do it naked."

Annalise smiled and walked over to him with a shirt in her hands. She helped him put on his breeches, and he went to perform his morning ablutions.

Annalise put on her dressing gown and collected all her hairpins when Blake peeked out of his dressing room.

"A thought crossed my mind just now. We have never had a wedding trip."

Annalise turned to him. "No, we have not."

He walked toward her and took her hands in his. "What do you say we take this summer to travel to the continent?"

Annalise blinked. "I think it's a splendid idea."

Blake ran his thumbs over her knuckles. "I shall ask my solicitor to prepare an itinerary

for us. We can tour your favorite, Italy.”

Annalise grinned. “I love you.”

Blake placed a soft kiss on her mouth. “I love you.”

\* \* \*

Jarvis met Blake near the Newgate prison. He wore a sling around his arm but otherwise seemed healthy. Ford was in worse shape and was still bedridden after their adventures, so he couldn’t accompany them to question the thugs.

Ford’s associates came, though, and they were the ones who arranged for a private meeting between Blake, Jarvis, and the bandits.

They entered the room and looked around. The thugs were the ones chained to their chairs now, while Blake stood tall over them. The door closed, leaving them in privacy.

Blake looked over at his former captors in disgust. “You know that I was abused by the both of you for weeks. But what I went through in your hands doesn’t compare to how I was tortured on that slave ship you sold me to. So trust me when I say this, I shall enjoy returning the favor.” The bandits visibly shrunk. “Unless you tell us who sent you after me.”

“We don’t know. We never knew his name.”

Blake didn’t believe it for a moment.

“Blake, do you mind calling one of the gaolers here?” Jarvis asked.

“Why would you want them here?”

“Just, please, do it.”

Blake slowly turned, unable to move too fast. When he reached the door, however, an agonizing cry pierced his ears. He flinched and turned back. Jarvis stood still by one of the thugs. The poor chap was writhing in agony.

“What the—”

“I swear,” the other man cried, his wide eyes frightened. “We never even saw his face. He wore a dark kerchief over half of his face and a mask.”

Blake looked at Jarvis. His face was marred in confusion.

“He was a toff,” the other bandit groaned in pain. “One of your own.”

Blake made his way closer to the bandits. “Why? Did he at least tell you why he kept me prisoner?”

“We made a mistake... It wasn't you he wanted.”

“What?” Blake's eyes widened like saucers. All the torture, all the pain, was for naught? For someone else. “Who did he want?”

There was a pause before both thugs looked at Jarvis. “Him.”

# Epilogue

*Summer 1741*

Annalise entered Lavinia's sitting room, a basket in her hands.

"Annalise, dear, come, sit." Lavinia hovered over her and helped her into a settee.

"Olivia, darling, I haven't seen you in so long!" Annalise exclaimed as she noticed her friend.

"Yes, I've been... indisposed."

"What happened?" Annalise asked as she placed a basket next to her and opened the lid. Miss Gale jumped out of it and started sniffing around.

"How do you do, Miss Gale?" Lavinia asked cheerfully.

"Well, the gowns you made me buy that day at the modiste are uncomfortable, to say the least," Olivia said with a pout. "I can't walk in them, and I can barely breathe. I made a fool of myself during one of the balls and recovered at home for the rest of the season."

"They are of the latest fashion," Annalise protested.

"They itch."

Annalise gave a soft smile. She knew Olivia would find the gowns uncomfortable. They all did, even Olivia. "You need to get used to them if you want to catch a gentleman's attention. Unless you've changed your mind?"

Olivia shook her head. "No." She picked at the skin around her fingers.

"And you need to cease doing that," Annalise observed with a smile.

Olivia balled her hands into a fist. "All those etiquette lessons are not what I need. There are plenty of women versed in the art of etiquette and yet unmarried, or married unhappily."

At Lavinia's grimace, Olivia bit her lip. "I... Apologies. I didn't mean you."

"Well, if you did, you wouldn't be wrong," Lavinia said.

Miss Gale walked over to Lavinia's chair at that time and was sniffing her skirts. She then jumped up and started settling on her lap with loud purring.

"She likes you," Olivia said.

"We shall have a grand time, shan't we, Galinthias?" Lavinia addressed the cat.

"Speaking of your grand time. She is very picky about the food," Annalise said. "She prefers fish and milk most of all. And if you give her bread, it is better to dip it into the milk



first.”

Lavinia laughed. “Do not worry about your cat. I shall take good care of her.”

Annalise smiled. “She is fierce. She will not let anyone harm you. I am glad my favorite ladies will be looking out for each other while I am gone.”

“Do not worry about us and have an incredible wedding journey,” Olivia said.

“I am so glad everything is well with you and Blake,” Lavinia chimed in.

“I couldn’t be happier,” Annalise said. “Perhaps Miss Gale can spread some of the luck with men your way too.”

Lavinia grimaced.

Olivia narrowed her eyes. “You are right!”

Annalise blinked. “What did I say?”

“Her mind made the jump again,” Lavinia said with a chuckle.

“Why bother asking for advice from ladies about what gentlemen find enticing when I can ask—”

“A cat?” Annalise raised a brow.

“A gentleman.”

Lavinia and Annalise exchanged a look.

Annalise pursed her lips. “I said no such thing.”

“I told you, she made a leap.”

Olivia wasn’t listening to them anymore, however. She stood and collected her gloves. “Thank you for a delightful conversation. Have a wonderful trip.” She gave Annalise a hug and stormed out of the sitting room.

Annalise and Lavinia just stared in her wake.

\* \* \*

Annalise settled into a carriage a few minutes later. Blake sat there, scribbling something in his journal.

“Oh, thank God. I thought I lost you and was about to come and fetch you myself.”

Annalise settled next to him and leaned against his shoulder. He thumped on the roof, and the carriage lurched into motion.

“It was difficult saying goodbye to Miss Gale,” Annalise breathed.

“I am certain she will be well.”

“Oh, she will. I think she forgot all about me the moment she jumped out of the basket. It is I who shall be missing her.”

Blake tipped her chin with his fingers, forcing her to look up at him. He dipped his head and pressed his lips against hers. “I shall make every effort to divert your mind,” he whispered against her lips, then lowered his head and captured her mouth in a scorching kiss.

\* \* \*

In the meantime...

Jarvis sat in a chair in his study, rubbing his shoulder with a pungent ointment. He detested the smell. He detested even more that he had to endure it twice a day. But if it meant his shoulder would stop hurting, and he would get his full range of motion back, he would endure it. He needed to make a full recovery, and soon.

The thief-takers were already on his tail every time he went on a mission, but as he'd learned a few months ago, apparently, there was someone else looking for him, too. He couldn't fathom who that might be, but he needed to find out.

A light rap sounded on his door, and at his command to enter, the butler came inside.

“A missive for you, sir.”

Jarvis outstretched his hand. The butler handed him the envelope and disappeared.

Jarvis opened a missive and read a few lines in a familiar scrawl.

*Need your assistance at your earliest convenience. The matter of utmost urgency.*

O.

The End.

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